

The Sorcerer's Receptionist

2

Written by
Mako

Illustrated by
Maro



VISIT...

LANZAROTE
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Zozo

(Zozo Gaia Parasta)

Nanalie's bright, cheerful senior at Harré. She helps Nanalie out at work.



Rockmann

(Alois Hades Arnold Rockmann)

Nanalie's rival ever since their days together at magic school. Even after they go their separate ways following graduation, she just can't seem to get rid of him. He's now Captain of the First Platoon of the Royal Order of Knights.



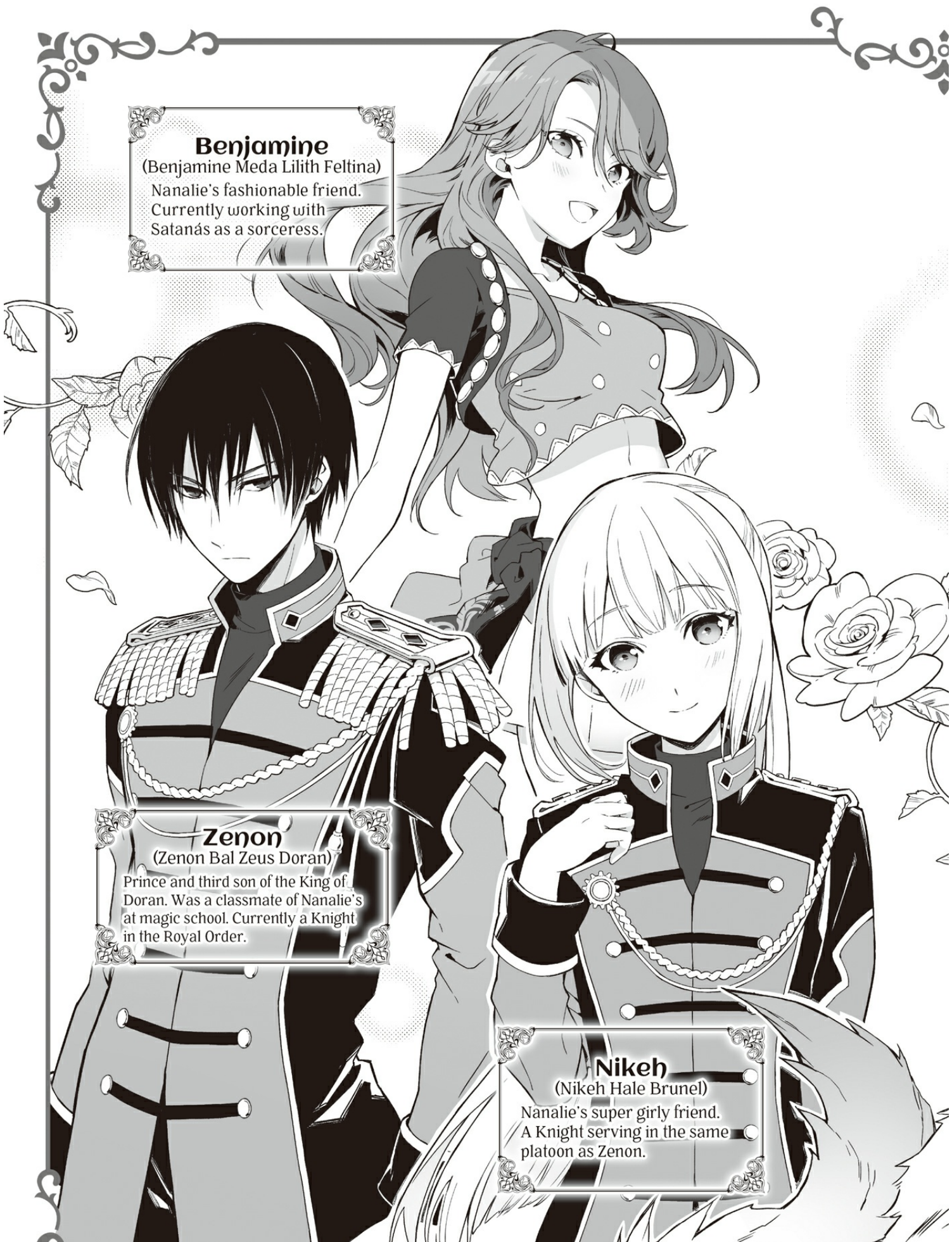
Nanalie

(Nanalie Persephone Hel)

Has wanted to be a "receptionist lady" at Harré from a young age, and now she's got her dream job! She's getting used to the work, but keeps running into problems?!

Lala

Nanalie's familiar. A Blanc Lynx, a type of magical animal that lives in cold regions and has white fur, she is a girl wolf.



Benjamin
(Benjamin Meda Lilith Feltina)
Nanalie's fashionable friend.
Currently working with
Satanás as a sorceress.

Zenon
(Zenon Bal Zeus Doran)
Prince and third son of the King of
Doran. Was a classmate of Nanalie's
at magic school. Currently a Knight
in the Royal Order.

Nikeh
(Nikeh Hale Brunel)
Nanalie's super girly friend.
A Knight serving in the same
platoon as Zenon.

Dramatis Personae

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Working at Harré, Part Four

The next day.

I wake up the next day at the same time I always do. No one would guess from my appearance that I had been at a masked ball the night before. After I'd come back to the dormitory, I'd taken a bath and then collapsed on top of my bed into a deep slumber.

Exhaustion was all I had felt after the night's events. *Why did I have to go through all that for a jerk like Rockmann? He should've just married the Princess. As if I cared what he did! I should've refused the Duke's request from the very beginning. He expected Rockmann to open up and tell me, of all people, his true feelings about the Princess. It was too much to ask, even for a Duke.*

Irritated as I was, I hadn't had the time or energy to do anything about the white dress those three servants had forced me into back at the Duke's house. I'd hung it up on the clothing rack in the corner last night. *That's where it'll stay for now, I suppose. It'll be stupidly inconvenient, but eventually I do need to go back and return that dress to him.*

"Ha..." Looking out the window, I let out a sigh. The sun is shining brightly today.

Still half-asleep, I change out of my pajamas and into my Harré uniform before making myself some breakfast. I'm so out of it that as I try to take my first bite of rice I shove it into the side of my face, but after that I somehow manage to put the food into my mouth.

Guess I'll need to wash my face before I head out.

* * * *

"Ms. Zozo, good morning."

"Morning, Nanalie. Um, are you feeling a bit tired today?"

"Not at all. I'm full of energy!"

I've arrived at Harré, and now I'm settling into my seat at the reception desk. Zozo exchanges a few words with the night shift receptionists before she sits down next to me, yawning. I'd said "good morning" in the same way I always do, but she's looking at me as if she's worried, eyebrows furrowed. *I'm not tired at all. I'm practically brimming with energy.*

"Ms. Zozo, you yourself seem rather tired, yawning like that," I say.

"Oh, me?" **yawn** "I'm always—" *yawn* "—staying up late reading magazines —" *yawn* "—so I feel the same as always, really." *yawn*

All the women in the Kingdom have begun to read this one women's magazine that's become popular recently. Zozo tells me that she has new issues delivered directly to her house, and it's apparently her favorite thing to read, filled with secret information that no amount of skills or spells could give her. Supposedly.

She must be exaggerating, right? What could that magazine possibly be about?

Her eyes light up with excitement as she tells me about the three most interesting articles from the most recent issue: "How to Seal the Deal with Your Crush," "Women Who Are Called 'Ladies,'" and "Today's Horoscope."

Well, based on the titles of those articles alone, little Ms. Zozo here might be in love with someone, I think, looking at her. I might be wrong, of course.

There aren't many sorcerers or clients who come into Harré in the small hours of the night or early in the morning. There's actually almost *no one* here at the moment. The only reason that we're able to sit here chattering away, even though we're on duty, is because it's still so early. If the Director saw us making small talk with each other like this in front of clients or sorcerers, I'm fairly certain she'd fly over to punch us for slacking off. When one of the male employees had laughed at a joke Mr. Alkes made the other day, she'd smacked him with her fists. Twice, at that. I'd seen the two large welts on the employee's head as he cringed in agony from her blows. *I will never end up like that, or so I'd sworn to myself.*

"Oh, that's right," Zozo says, changing the subject. "There was a sorcerer yesterday...or should I say early this morning? Anyway, it sounds like a sorcerer

took care of Ms. Maria's request."

"Really?"

Zozo rummages around in some papers in her drawers and pulls out a copy of the request form and shows it to me. *That request was made just yesterday! I'm quite grateful to whoever took care of this, especially considering they did it during the night.*

As I look over the request form, I spot the sorcerers' names on the paper, right in the middle.

"O—oh?"

"What's the matter?"

One of the names is a man's name, the other, at first glance, easily mistaken for a man's.

I know both of those names quite well.

"These names..."

"Hello—! We're back from completing the request."

As I mumble to myself, looking over the request form, Harré's front door swings open and two sorcerers walk in. I lift my eyes from the paper and begin to bid them a "good morning," but fall silent in surprise at the sight of my two friends.

"Hey, isn't that Nanalie?"

"Nanalie! It's been so long. How've you been?"

The two names on the request form were:

"Naru Perseus Satanás" and "Benjamine Meda Lilith Feltina."

With even the middle names matching, I knew it had to be them. They're two friends of mine whom I met back at school, and now, even after graduation, we exchange letters from time to time. They're both very special to me.

"So the sorcerers who accepted the request—that was you two, wasn't it?"

They've just come back from completing a request, so before we start talking

any further, I have them go over to the desks meant for sorcerers so that they can take care of their paperwork.

So this means that Ms. Maria's request has been fulfilled: her husband's been found. Somewhere in that forest, filled with demons as it is, they must have found him during the night. I give them a quiet, discreet round of applause as I sit there in awe of how quickly they accomplished that task.

"Those sorcerers took care of business rather quickly, don't you think? Do you know them?"

"Yes, they're my friends."

"In any case, I'm glad that Ms. Maria's husband was found. I confess I *did*, you know, think it might end up in *that way*."

"Whatever do you mean?"

"I thought that her husband might have, you know, turned into that demon," she says, a guilty look on her face. "I suppose it's in bad taste for me to say that out loud," she adds, wincing a bit at her own impudence. "Still, I really am glad it all ended well." She lets out a relieved sigh, placing one hand on her chest as she gives me a smile.

Really, it's quite fortunate it all ended without any further trouble. I will confess that I too had considered the possibility that he might have turned into that demon, after Mr. Alkes said those horrible things (about its "human-like tongue" or whatever), but knowing that isn't the case allows me to relax a bit. Having recently become an acquaintance of Dr. Aristo's, I'd also thought I might pop over to his mansion if this case were to grow more complicated. *It seems like that won't be necessary after all.* Still, I'm not going to allow myself to forget I have that particular ace up my sleeve whenever I run into trouble in the future.

Of course, I *am* still a mere commoner, and if I were to show up at his door, I'm not sure if Dr. Aristo would be willing to speak with me, knowing who I really am.

"Alrighty then! Nanalie, I'm going to leave you in charge here, okay?" Ms. Zozo pats my back as she stands up to leave her seat. "I'm going to be in a

meeting with the Director for a bit,” she adds. I nod my head in understanding and watch as she hurries off towards the inner rooms where the Director’s office is.

Now I’m alone at the reception desk. I look down at Ms. Maria’s request form once again. *Any summoner who would go up against some mysterious demon in the middle of the night to solve a missing-persons case truly is amazing, in my humble opinion.*

The average person would never want to go up against a demon. Even the average mage who possessed the necessary skills and knowledge to attack and defend themselves from demons wouldn’t exactly be jumping at the opportunity to fight one. *After all, they eat humans with magical ability. Just that fact alone is enough to freak me out, personally. I’m sure that from the demon’s perspective, it would look like their prey had strolled into its den on its own two legs, begging to be eaten. What beast would pass up a feast like that?*

“Wow, Nanalie, it’s so cool seeing you on the job!”

My two friends, having finished their paperwork at the other reception desk and received their reward, have made their way back over to where I’m sitting. Benjamine’s long, wavy red hair is hanging down loosely past her shoulders, and her eyes are all ablaze with excitement as she approaches my desk.

Satanás looks like he’s gotten his hair cut. Those silver curls are shorter than when I saw him last time. The two of them are both wearing clothes that cover every part of their body, leaving no skin exposed. Satanás is wearing a long-sleeved, padded blue shirt with long leather pants, while Benjamine has taken long pieces of cloth and wrapped them around her forearms and calves to provide extra protection beyond the edges of her armor.

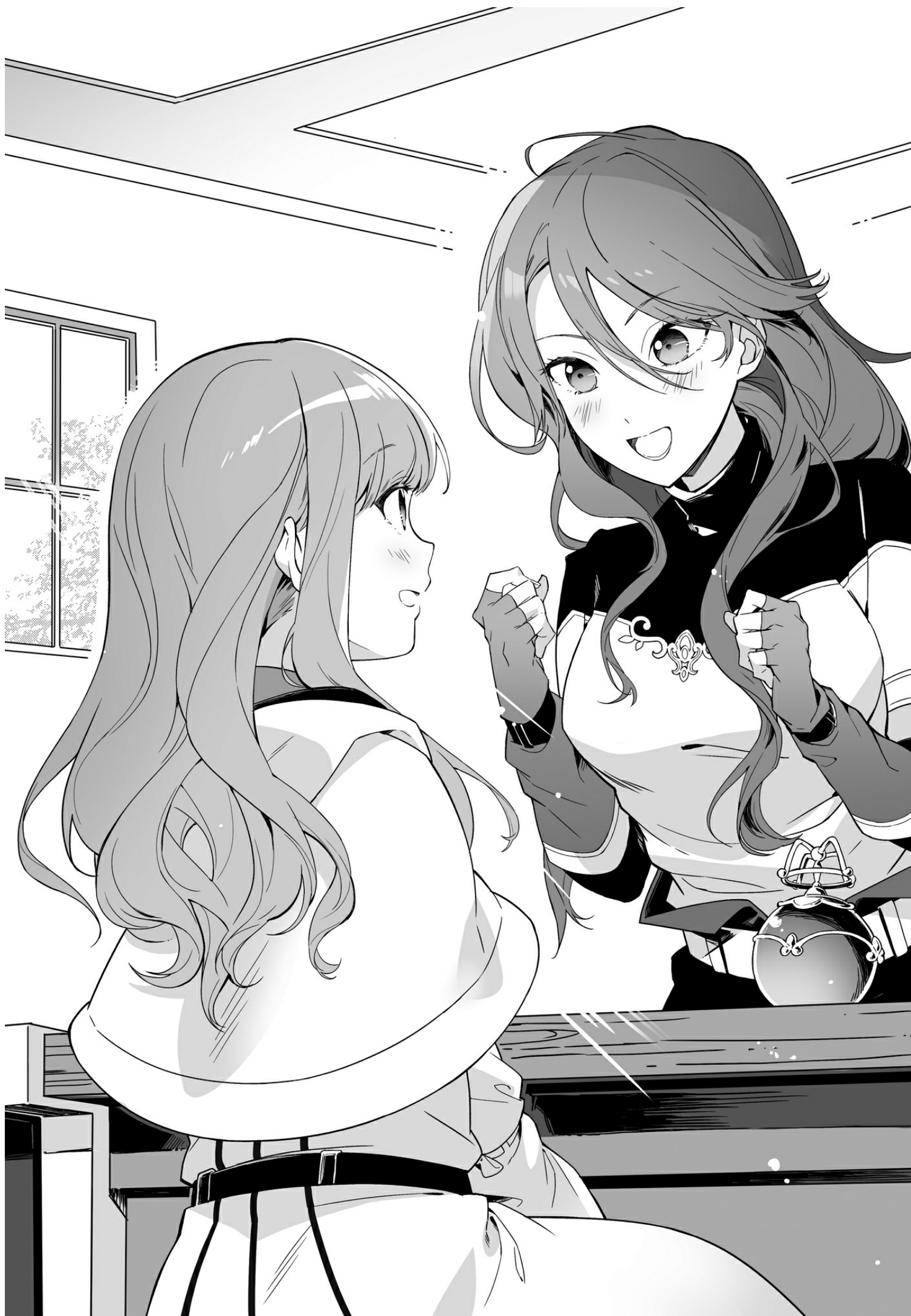
It’s just good sense, of course, for sorcerers to have different outfits for different types of assignments. For work out in the fields, they usually wear a pair of light overalls, while for assignments that deal with demons, they go out to work in armor that’s easy to move around in. My two friends are wearing clothes that look like exactly the right thing to wear for their assignment.

“That white uniform looks pretty cute on you, Nanalie,” Benjamine says, smiling.

“That, um, getup looks pretty cutesy-cool on yourself, you know?”

“Compliment me all you like, the only thing I’m giving you is candy.”

“Ooh! You’ve got candy for me?”



Benjamin takes a small piece of candy from a pouch hanging from her belt and gives it to me. I am, technically speaking, “working,” so I simply thank her and hide her gift in a little pouch inside my bag under the desk. *I’ll be sure to eat that later!*

She’s always been the type of person who keeps her word. Especially when it comes to her love life, she says what she feels and does what she says. She does tend to give up *right* at the moment of truth, however, when it comes to making a move on a guy—but I like that aspect of her personality too.

It’s reassuring to know that part of her still hasn’t changed.

“Still, it’s rather amazing what you two pulled off. You found Mr. Gouda in just one night, didn’t you?”

“Mmmm yeah. Didn’t have any problems ’cuz that demon on the request form job notice wasn’t there.”

“We managed to find that man quite quickly,” Benjamin adds. “If you go deep into that forest, you’ll find a lake, and he was lying down right next to it. His face was so pale that for a moment I thought that he was dead. But he wasn’t injured, and I must admit we were relieved when he showed signs of life when we called out his name.”

“There was that note on the request form—something about making a note of where we found the guy? We did that, so take a look later, will ya?”

It sounded like they found him almost completely unharmed and, except for how extraordinarily pale his face had been, were able to get him back to normal after they quickly cast a healing spell on him. I’ve no idea whether or not a healing spell works on someone who isn’t visibly injured, but from what they tell me it sounds like he had a healthier complexion after they did so, so it must’ve turned out fine.

They took him straight home to Ms. Maria after that. Apparently she’d collapsed in relief at the sight of her husband, and with both of them in such fragile physical and emotional states, they’d stuck around for a while to make sure they were both alright. “They bowed and said ‘thank you’ so many times, it was starting to get embarrassing,” Benjamin says with a grimace.

By the time the sun had risen, Ms. Maria had calmed down enough to take care of the paperwork. She'd signed off on the request form, and after that, the two of them had come straight to Harré.

Mr. Gouda, however, had never actually "woken up," even after they'd brought him home, so it turned out that we were still stuck not knowing where he'd been or what had happened to him. Ms. Maria had told the two sorcerers that she would come into Harré with her husband tomorrow. *I suppose we'll have to wait until then to find out what happened to him.*

The note that Satanás mentioned is something I had written on the request form in the highly unlikely case that Mr. Gouda was found. *With that location, we should be able to investigate the area with psychometry to get a better idea of what he went through.* That information would be most useful in the event that Mr. Gouda didn't wake up: as long as we knew the location of the incident, we'd be able to nail down some details about a possible encounter with a demon.

"Must admit, I wanted to be the one to take out that demon," Naru says, looking almost wistful as he glances down at the image of the demon on the request form.

"Naru, you're always getting me into trouble with that bloodthirsty temperament of yours...oh, that's right, we still haven't eaten breakfast."

"Let's grab something here, yeah?"

"Okay! I'll go get us something good, alright? You find us a table and wait for me."

"Sure."

Benjamine dashes off towards the food counter. Satanás watches as she goes. I realize that now would be a good chance to ask him some questions.

"How long have you been working together? This is the first time I've seen you two here, I think."

It's been six months since I started working at Harré, but until today I hadn't seen either one of them come into the Guild. Since my father's a sorcerer, I do see him around from time to time, but today's my first encounter with my two

school friends. Every time my father comes in, regardless of whether any other receptionist is available, he always waits in the line in front of my desk. At first, Zozo and the other senior receptionists would wave to him, saying “I’m free over here, sir,” but he would always just say in return, “I want to see what my daughter’s like on the job, up close.” He’s said that ridiculous line so many times now that whenever he comes in, all the other receptionists merely smile at him as he waits in my line. It’s more than a little embarrassing for me that he makes such a fuss like that at my workplace, and I’ve tried shooing him away to this or that other receptionist, but no matter what I say or do he always ends up waiting in the line in front of my desk.

“That so? You know, we were just thinking the same thing about you,” Satanás says. “We both had other things to do during the day yesterday, so it kinda ended up that we did nighttime work for a change last night.”

“Ah, now I understand why we wouldn’t see each other. I’ve never been on the night shift, since I’m still just a junior receptionist, so I’m never here when you normally come in to report back after an assignment...”

All of my former classmates are working hard in their new careers. Nikeh and Prince Zenon are serving in the same unit as the Knight Commander, and as Prince, I’m sure Zenon has to work even harder to prove himself as both a royal and a worthy candidate of becoming Vice Commander in the future. Maris, of course, is working hard at learning everything she’ll need to know in order to be an excellent Marquise in the future, while Rockmann is already a captain of the smallest platoon in the Order. Benjamine and Satanás are obviously getting experienced in their everyday work as sorcerers. In just half a year, they’ve grown capable of taking care of a difficult request like Ms. Maria’s in just one night.

Then, of course, there is me. Failing at magic left and right as I fly around casting ancient spells that lead me into trespassing into other people’s mansions due to my carelessness.

“But Nanalie, I still hear a lot about you, you know?”

“...What kind of things do you hear?”

“That you listen carefully to whatever your clients need to talk to you about,

that you're kind to them, and that sorcerers will take care of the requests you post up on the board in under a day. That's gotta be why I hear people saying 'when you need to make a request, get that beauty with blue hair to write it up for you.' 'Blue hair' can only mean you, right?"

"Huh...? No, that's all just exaggeration, right? I've only been working here for half a year, and I still need to have the other receptionists help me all the time...anyway, they can't be talking to me; I'm no 'beauty.' They must've mistaken me for someone else."

I've never heard anybody so much as whisper anything like that. Who's going around spreading tall tales like that when I've only been working here half a year? Embarrassing is all it is. Besides, anyone who heard those rumors and then saw me in person would be in for a big disappointment. They'd probably think something like, "oh, she's not as kind as I thought," or "the sorcerers aren't taking on my request like they said," or "she's no beauty at all!"

From a certain point of view, those kinds of rumors could be interpreted as slander. Too high of a compliment is still a lie.

"Don't get fussy about the details. You may not realize it, but anyone can see just how hard you're working, right?"

"The details," good grief. That's my line of work, thank you very much. It's going to be utterly impossible for me to ignore any rumors being spread about my capabilities as a receptionist. My professional reputation is on the line! If only I could be as nonchalant as Satanás is about the whole affair.

Satanás has always been pretty easygoing. I don't think I've ever *once* seen him panic about anything. *Except for those times he hadn't finished his homework. "Hurry up and show me the answers! I've got no idea what to write here!" The number of times he badgered me like that were too many to even count.*

"Ooohh, that's right—Satanás," I say, trying to seem extremely casual as I broach this next topic, "how's it been going lately?"

"How's *what* been going?"

"You two are working together, right?"

What I'm really asking is how his and Benjamine's relationship is going.

He must've picked up on my line of questioning, because he visibly cringes, diverts his gaze, and puts his hands behind his back. He isn't comfortable with this subject, that's clear to see.

Hm? That reaction seems a bit different than what I remember from when I asked him about their relationship before... Could Satanás, of all people, have finally picked up on the signals Benjamine's been sending him? Back during our school days, he'd always gone on about how he preferred older women with "hourglass figures." *Now perhaps that isn't the case...?*

He looks back at me. I'm positively overflowing with anticipation for his next words, finally admitting what I've known he felt for Benjamine after all these years...!

One side of his mouth twitches in discomfort. "You know what, Nanalie?"

"What?"

"The rrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrriskiest gamble a man can *possibly make* in the *entire world* is to tell a woman he loves her."

Right when I think he's getting serious about Benjamine, out of his mouth comes *that* nonsense.

"Dummy!" I poke him in the eyes with two fingers.

"Ouch!"

"A *gamble*, huh? You aren't going around *playing* her now, are you?"

"—what're you going on about?! Those aren't my words, that's what my gramps told me when grandma was slapping him around one time. They're true alright."

What are you going on about?

"Then what is it, then?" I ask him. "If Benjamine tells you she likes you or wants to be your girlfriend, how are you gonna answer? By saying that you're 'not quite ready' for that yet?"

"Well, I dunno, maybe?"

“I’m going to say this once and *only* once: the moment Benjamine comes to me sobbing her eyes out over something you say or do is the exact moment I am going to come after you and freeze *you* and your *stone-cold heart* with a blizzard so ferocious it’s gonna make what I did to Rockmann look like a pleasant winter’s day.”

“...Man’s worst enemy, the friends of his woman...”

“Ha? You running your mouth again?”

“Not at all, ma’am.”

Satanás is avoiding looking at me. Now Benjamine walks over to us with some trays from the food counter. “Hey! I got us our breakfast! I thought you were going to get us a table?”

Satanás looks visibly relieved at the sight of Benjamine. He knows I can’t continue interrogating him any longer now. *Still, I don’t think it’ll be that long until he finally gives in and admits to how he really feels about her.*

“What were you two talking about?”

“Just about whether he was actually able to get any work done with you around, you know.”

“Rude! I’m not slowing him down at all!”

From what I understand, *Satanás* had been the one to propose that they work together, and I think at that point, their romantic fortunes were decided. *The only reason they haven’t moved on to the next phase of their relationship is because he can’t be honest about his feelings. But I suppose it’s not my place to rush him.* I decide I’ll just be as supportive as I can without meddling. I can’t help but smile when I see the two of them together now, anyway, lovebirds that they are.

I’d said that ridiculous line to Satanás about how I would come after him if he made Benjamine cry, but she’s the type who’d go and bring the hammer down on him herself if he ever did anything stupid, so I probably have no business interfering any further.

I have no interest in Rockmann’s love life, but I will confess I am quite invested

in the relationship between these two.

After they finished eating breakfast, they went straight home to go to sleep after a long night of work. “If we stay around here any longer,” Benjamine said, “I feel like we’d be talking with you all day long!”

Sure, I would’ve gotten into trouble if they had actually done that, but just hearing those words made me happy.

* * * *

“What’re you reading?”

“Oh, it’s nothing special.”

“Labor laws and the aristocratic code?”

Work had calmed down a bit. I’m on my break now, eating lunch and going through some books in Harré’s reference library. As I sit there poring over the dense texts, Ms. Harris and Mr. Alkes enter the room, apparently to return a book. They’re each holding three slim volumes, their work satchels slung over their shoulders as if they’ve just come back from some fieldwork.

I didn’t see either of them this morning. They must have been out on a preliminary investigation.

“That’s a rather thick book you’re reading there,” Ms. Harris says, nodding at the tome lying on the desk in front of me. She gently picks it up, brushing her soft, light brown hair behind her ears as she looks through it. “This seems like a fairly complicated text...” she mutters, eyes narrowing in concentration.

That conversation from last night replays in my mind.

“So, so...what’s your answer?”

“Here’s my answer: Articles Three and Ten of the Magical Labor Laws of the Kingdom of Doran, followed by Articles Thirty and Thirty-One of the Aristocratic Code.”

Those words had me stumped. Right when I thought I’d finally figure out what was going on inside his head, out of his mouth came that riddle.

It’s not like I am *completely compelled* to figure out what he was trying to say,

but the possibility that he was making fun of me with that line is too significant to ignore. I've gone through all of Harré's books on law to find these two texts that will hopefully help me decode what he said.

I remember which parts of the laws he had referenced, of course, but I had no idea what he *meant* by those references.

Was he making a joke? Or was he referring to some implication of those laws when I'd asked him about his feelings?

"You've got a lot left to learn."

I *snap* the pen in my hands in half at the memory of him and his smug face.

"Um, Nanalie? Your hands are completely black with ink..."

"Please don't mind me."

"Hel, you don't look so—"

"Please don't mind me."

That scumbag.

On the ever so slight chance that I did, in fact, have "a lot left to learn," it was completely insensitive for him to say that to me straight out, without worrying about my feelings. *Prick.*

I suddenly feel a bit concerned for all those beautiful young ladies who had been fawning over him all night. *Girls, really, is this the kind of guy you want to pair up with in the future?*

I try explaining the situation to Ms. Harris. "This guy I know was supposed to get married, but the girl he was going to marry ended up having feelings for someone else, or something. I asked the guy whether or not he'd had feelings for the girl in the first place, and he answered me with a citation of these four laws...I'm just trying to figure out what he'd meant by that."

I'm wiping my ink-stained hands on a brown handkerchief. They both have strangely cautious expressions on their faces while they listen to me complain about "this guy."

"Don't people usually have feelings for someone they're about to marry?"

“Hmmm, well, yeah, but let’s just say it was a bit of a mystery in his case.”

At this point, I too have stopped understanding what point I’m trying to make, or the purpose of those laws.

“Weren’t all these Articles written by Premier Querohli?”

Mr. Alkes takes the book from Ms. Harris and starts paging through it himself, reading all the pages I’ve bookmarked. He stands there stroking his chin in thought with one hand as he looks carefully at one entry. His bangs must be getting in the way of his reading, because every once in a while he twitches his head to the side a bit, as if to get them out of his eyes.

“Premier Querohli?”

“Who’s this ‘Premier Querohli’?”

“Querohli”? Isn’t that some kind of vegetable?

Ms. Harris and I both tilt our heads to one side in confusion. Mr. Alkes goes over to a bookshelf and takes a book from the very top, then brings it over to show to us. On the front cover and along the binding, I see the title: “A List of the Kingdom’s Subjects.”

A list of the Kingdom’s subjects...?

Mr. Alkes informs us that Premier Querohli or whoever was someone who lived around two hundred years ago. “I went through a phase when I was studying law,” he says. “More specifically, I was studying how certain laws had come about and who had written them.”

“Why were you studying things like that?”

“Ah, well...I wanted to pass the bar exam to get on the Royal Court at the time. After a while, though, I got too bored studying law and ended up joining the Knights’ Order instead, of course.” He has a slightly pained grimace on his face as he says this. “Anyhow, it turns out that Premier Querohli was quite a player. He made these laws for pretty specific reasons, and it’s actually kinda funny—all of them are about women:

“Regarding payment for labor, there must be absolutely no difference in wages between that of men and women. The labors of both have precisely the

same value.

“The practice of enslaving witches is henceforth forbidden.

“Any hospitality or entertainment establishment where the majority of the employees are female must report on its operations to the Kingdom. Any establishment found to be operating without Royal permission shall be punished according to Article 16.

“Any noble man is forbidden from forcing a working class woman to be his concubine, lover, or into any other informal romantic relationship. Even should the woman consent to such a relationship, it shall not be permitted under any circumstances whatsoever.”

...He’s right. All these laws have to do with women. That’s clear enough on a casual reading, but I still don’t know what significance there is in listing them all together. Perhaps what Mr. Alkes said about the reasons they were written is what Rockmann had been trying to hint at?

“Why were these laws written?” I asked.

“Well, at the time, the Premier had his heart set on a woman, only she was a commoner, not a noble. Apparently he made these laws so as to make her life just a little bit easier, or something like that.

“Right before he passed away, he supposedly whispered these words: ‘*I never did manage to make her mine. My whole life...not once have I been troubled by a lack of women in my life, but the one woman whom I wanted more than anyone else never became mine.*’ The kicker is that he was *married* to someone else when he said that.”

“What an awful brute!” Ms. Harris shakes her head. “Not someone I’d like to marry.”

“I hear he was quite the looker, you know?”

“Hmm, in that case, I’d have to think it over...” Ms. Harris apparently cares about how a man looks more than anything else.

Those words must have been awful for the wife to hear, but the fact of the matter was that the Premier had been unable to forget that commoner woman

for the rest of his life. Some say that the loves you remember most clearly are those that were unrequited. Perhaps that was the case for him. Not that I would know, having lived only a fraction as long as he did, but somehow I sense that's how he felt.

"Aha! What if *that* is what your friend meant to say?"

"What?"

"That he had feelings for *someone else!*"

Ms. Harris nods. "That must be it!" She's so excited that she starts yanking on Mr. Alkes's hair and jumps in the air. I hear something like a *snap* as she does so. At the sensation of some of his hair being ripped out, Mr. Alkes leaps into action, snatches at Ms. Harris's glasses and tries to break them.

...Turns out that fights between forty-year-old men and thirty-year-old women are rather lame. To no one's surprise.

"But then there's the possibility that he wasn't referring to himself, but rather the woman whom he was to marry. What if that line—'*the one woman whom I wanted more than anyone else*'—referred to her? Maybe he was heartbroken that she hadn't chosen him instead."

After my conversation with Mr. Alkes and Ms. Harris, I try searching for other connections between those laws, and other details about the Premier's background, but all I'm able to discover is that Querohli was *quite* the womanizer. To the point where no one would have thought it odd if he had been stabbed several times, by several different women. *What goes around, comes around.*

Mr. Alkes's words echo in my mind. "*He had feelings for someone else!*"

I shake my head. For now, I'll just take Rockmann's riddle as another way of expressing his disappointment with how things with the Princess turned out. *He won't tell me if I'm right or wrong if I straight up ask him again, so I guess that's all I know for now.*

Still, that had been an extremely roundabout way for him to express his feelings on the matter.

My lunch break is over, so I'm back at my desk. I'd hardly had any time to eat anything thanks to all the research I'd been doing, but somehow I'd managed to take a few bites in between reading the old law books to my heart's content. While the riddle hadn't been "solved," I was now done with it. *No point in spending any more time on something like that.* I certainly didn't let it take up *all* of my lunch break, as the more pressing issue was my empty stomach. *As if I could bear dying of starvation while I'm on the job.*

"I'm back."

"Welcome back! I'll head out on break myself once I post this up."

I'd had one of my female senior colleagues fill in for me at my seat while I was out on break. We all take breaks in alternating shifts. I give her a nod in gratitude for allowing me to go first. I look around and notice that Zozo's not back from her meeting with the Director yet. *Hmm, what's taking her so long, I wonder?* I haven't seen her since she got up from her chair earlier this morning.

Something the other receptionist is holding in her hands catches my eye. I point to it and ask, "What's that?"

"This? It's something that just got delivered from the neighboring neighbor of the neighboring Kingdom to ours."

In her hands is a piece of paper with "**URGENT! SEEKING ICE WITCHES!**" written across the top of it. *An urgent need for Ice-Type mages? They must have some big project they're working on. But what kind of project needs only "Ice Witches?" What exactly do they need them for?*

The other receptionist notices my puzzled expression. "They're gathering applications to become ladies-in-waiting for the Queen of Orcinus," she explains.

Huh. "Ladies-in-waiting."

Orcinus is, just as she'd said, a country that is the "neighboring neighbor of the neighboring Kingdom to ours." It's a little bit farther away than the Kingdom of Sheera. From what I can see up on the bulletin board, other countries are also sending out special hiring notices, with good pay at that.

I look back down at the request for “Ice Witches.” *Oh my, that salary...it’s more than twice what I make here at Harré.* I feel rather disappointed to have been born in a part of the world where the coffers are not overflowing with gold as they apparently are in Orcinus. *Hold on, aren’t “ladies-in-waiting” the type of women who are servants and art tutors for the noble ladies they serve?*

On the paper, not much more is written about what they’re looking for in their “ladies-in-waiting” beyond that they “need not be noble.” *You know, it seems awfully naive for a noble to accept just any old commoner to come and work in their household, and I say that as a commoner.*

“Whatever could the point be of limiting it to ‘Ice Witch’ applicants?”

“Hey, Nanalie, you’re Ice-Type, right? Wouldn’t that work for you?”

A nearby sorceress had picked up on the topic of our conversation. “Why Ms. Hel, why don’t *you* go check it out?”

Lately, I’ve noticed that the sorcerers have begun to remember my name, and some are polite enough to call me by my last name. It’s not like anything else in particular has changed about me or the way I do my work, but I do feel happy to feel like my efforts are being acknowledged. I smile at the sorcerer, happy to be remembered.

If I get caught making idle conversation with our customers in front of the Director, though, she’s going to lecture me for sure. Or worse, punch me with that lightning-ball strike of hers.

I glance back at the door to her office, but it doesn’t seem as though it’s going to be opening any time soon. I let out a sigh of relief.

“Hey, Harris, take a look at this.”

Ms. Harris is back from her break. The receptionist next to me calls her up to the desks from where she’s doing paperwork in one of the back offices.

“What? ...Oh my, this girl looks so innocent! Don’t you think she’d be the perfect fit?”

“Harris, you can’t know *that* just based on appearances, dear.”

“What are you talking about?” I say, confused.

“Oh, well, it’s just...”

I try to take another look at the paper but Ms. Harris has snatched it out of my hands and is hiding a portion of the text with her hands. She gathers the other women around her as they look back and forth between the paper and me, whispering all the while.

Why in the world would they go through this charade of hiding the hiring notice from me? It’s going to be posted up on the bulletin board anyway, right? The sorceress who’s in on the conversation gives me a knowing smile from over the counter when we make eye contact.

What’s that supposed to mean?

“Ms. Hel, it says here that they are only looking for ‘young maidens.’”

Ms. Harris blushes as she says that. “Goodness gracious, you can’t go around saying that out loud in a place like this!” one of the other women whispers, and the rest all giggle.

I have no idea what’s so funny. Right now, I’m sure there’s a big question mark hovering over my head. *What part of that can they not talk about “in a place like this”?*

“I’d never apply for that, then,” I say. “I’m not some ‘young maiden,’ after all.”

“Is that so?” All of the women start tittering and teasing me. “I must admit I’m surprised,” one of them says, smiling. *What is so funny?*

“You’re a cute one, aren’t you?” The sorcerer who’d come over and joined our chat gives me a grin and a wave as she walks away towards the doors. She must have a job left to do.

Why would that hiring notice only be for “young maidens?”

Anyhow, I’ve already graduated from school. I’m a grown woman now. The only “witches” who will be applying for that job are those who are having a rough go of it or are quite thick-headed. I’m not going. As if I ever would!

The other receptionist tries to continue the conversation. “Orcinus, you know —”

“Now now, you need to run along and go eat your lunch before your break ends.”

“But Nanalie, I just—!”

I give her a little push on her back and she begins walking off towards the break room. *I do like having a chat now and then with my co-workers, but I'd prefer to talk about things like that outside of work, where I can relax and have a bit more fun.* “We'll continue this conversation later,” she says, teasing me before giving me a wave goodbye as she passes through the break room doors.

“Goodness, that took a long time. Sorry for leaving you here by yourself.”

“Ms. Zozo!”

As the other receptionist is leaving, Ms. Zozo bursts out the doors of the Director's office. She gives me a smile as she sits down next to me. “We ended up having more to talk about than I'd thought,” she says, massaging the sides of her head.

“Did you get it all taken care of?” I ask.

“Well...”

“Excuse me, I'd like to file a request.”

A woman (girl?) about the same age as me comes up to my desk. *Dang it Nanalie, focus on your job!* I turn away from Ms. Zozo to face the girl and hand her a request form.

“Pardon my distraction. What sort of request would you like to file?” She's a small young woman with her hair done up in two pigtails.

“The request, right. I'd like to file one about...”

Just looking at this girl is distracting. She's almost the same age as me—but is she a “girl,” or is she a “woman?” I need to know. I need to know in the same way that I need to know why all the other women laughed when I told them I'm not some “young maiden.”

The age of adulthood is eighteen, so with that in mind, the person in front of me is probably a “woman,” but she has this aura about her that makes me feel as though she's not *quite* an adult yet. *An uncertain phase of life, for sure.*

Then of course there's the fact that even though we are considered adults once we reach the age of eighteen, we don't actually go through the Coming of Age *ceremony* until we are nineteen years old, so perhaps that's why being this age feels so strange. *And that gap is only for women, so we're the only ones who have to deal with this uncertainty about who, exactly, we are in society.* Men go through their Coming of Age at eighteen years old. *Why isn't it the same for women?*

I'm sure there are various reasons for that difference, but as far as I know, no one else seems to think we should change that part of our cultural traditions to make it more equal for men and women.

Setting that aside.

"Well, there's been a lot of prelia in my neighborhood recently, and they've taken to destroying all the crops in my garden. I'm hoping that a sorcerer can come help me take care of them."

The woman pulls out a vegetable from her brown bag. It's been burned to a blackened crisp. From what I can see, it doesn't look like there's a single part left of it that can be eaten. Apparently she's been growing pukuchi in her backyard, which is a green vegetable often eaten by commoners. I myself have some as part of my dinner every day.

"Prelia are Fire-Type magical creatures, so in order to properly take care of their breeding areas, we'll need to send around a Fire-Type sorcerer. After all, prelia tend to take well to Fire-Type people."

"Is that so? You know, I do think I've heard that before..."

"Prelia normally only live near active volcanoes, so someone might have gone and adopted one as a pet, but abandoned it after they brought it home."

Prelia are a type of magical creature that live near volcanoes and in other relatively hot places. Some people apparently adore having them as pets, but some abandon them when their tendency to cause fires starts to cause trouble. In their new habitats near other people's houses, the only way they can go on living is by burning up all the farms and fields nearby. *Unfortunate creatures, really.*

Prelia are very cute when they're babies, looking rather like chubby little mice, but once they get larger, they grow sharp fangs and become half as tall as the average adult human. *With tears of lava and their propensity to spit balls of fire when angered, I can't recommend anyone go out and buy one as a pet.*

Having lost their cute, baby-like appearance, adolescent prelia are frequently abandoned by their owners once they become too difficult to care for.

Humans. Who do you think you are, going around and treating animals like they're your playthings? To make matters worse, there are some people who, after they've abandoned their grown-up prelia, *go back to the volcanoes* to catch another baby prelia to fill the hole in their heart.

The client in front of me seems to be aware of that whole process, because she adds that she wants the prelia to be "returned to the volcanoes unharmed, if possible."

"Here's what I can offer as a reward," she says, writing the amount down on the form.

"Excellent," I say, "I will get your request sent around to the sorcerers as soon as I can. It's still early in the day, so I think someone will likely be over to take care of them by the end of today or tomorrow."

"Great! Thank you so much."

"Take care on your way home," I say, standing up from my seat to give her a bow as she walks away from my reception desk.

I duplicate the request form and send a copy levitating over to the reception desks for sorcerers. One of the receptionists over there plucks it out of the air, looks over at me and gives me a thumbs-up. I give her a thumbs-up back and flash a smile in return.

After the young woman leaves, there aren't any clients waiting to be served, so I turn back to Ms. Zozo and resume our conversation.

"So, Ms. Zozo, what was...?"

"He's coming..."

"Director Locktiss?!"

The Director pops up out of nowhere and lays one hand on my shoulder and the other on Ms. Zozo's. I'd nearly jumped out of my skin in surprise at the sight of the Director. She's hunched over as if she's bearing some terrible weight and, from the look on her face, doesn't seem to be feeling too well.

That's odd. She looks nothing like the friendly, cheerful Director I know.

It's not that she's normally jumping-off-the-walls HAPPY! all the time or anything, but that relaxed smile she usually has on her face when she's smacking yet another employee who's screwed up on the job is nowhere to be found.

Let me be clear, she's not a rowdy ruffian or anything like that on a daily basis, but the way she's sighing so deeply right now would make anyone worry.

What had she meant by "he's coming?" Or rather, who?

"Wh-Who's coming, Director?"

"That BEARDFACE is coming here!"

Beardface.

The Director is squeezing our shoulders very, very tightly right now.

"Owowowowwowow! OUCH! Do—do you mean the Knight Commander?"

"Yeah!"

Now she's squeezing even harder. *She's going to rip my shoulder right off at this rate!*

Zozo starts begging. "Please, Director, would you *kindly* remove your hands *immediately?*" The Director apparently hears the tone of agony in her plea and snaps out of it, releasing us. "Dear me, I'm so sorry about that," she says, sticking out her lower lip in pity for us.

Thank the Goddess. She would've turned our shoulders into mincemeat if that had gone on any longer.

I knew *exactly* who the Director was referring to when she started going off about "Beardface." *Why, it must have been just the other day when she was telling me that I should "not just toss salt" on his face to "get rid of that slug,"*

but that I should “freeze his beard right off,” along with a load of other orders I couldn’t make head nor tails of.

“You see, I was just talking with the Director about the possibility of you, me, and Alkes going to do some psychometry at the place Mr. Gouda was found,” Zozo says, massaging her bruised shoulder as she glares at the Director.

“I’m sure you heard this from Zozo before, but you’re aware that we have to report all cases that deal with demons to the Kingdom and the Order, right? It’s such a pain making that report in person, so I just took care of it using the Mirror. I told the Knight Commander that the sorcerers hadn’t found any signs of a demon when they found Mr. Gouda, so we’d be quite alright with just some Harré employees going to take care of the psychometry.”

The Director’s entire body is shivering. It’s quite clear to see that she isn’t shivering out of fear or a chill, but something else entirely.

“Then he says ‘The Order must fulfill its duties with regards to this matter!’ HA! Who cares about ‘the Order’ and their ‘duties’! All he wants to do is take credit for the work we do here, that enormous IDIOT!”

Her fists are clenched, quivering, practically punching the air as she speaks.

The more angry I see her become about the Knight Commander, the more I want to know the reason for her fury. *All around us are sorcerers who can very easily see and hear the outburst she’s having in the middle of our office. Maybe she doesn’t care?* Usually she’d never shout like this, and she wouldn’t forgive any employee who did so either.

What kind of person could inspire such rage in the Director? I’ve seen him before, at a distance, but now I want to meet him. I really want to meet him.

I’m the type of person who, once I get interested in something, I go all out trying to gather as much information as I can. *I can’t just sit still and be ignorant of who this guy is and why the Director hates him so much!*

According to the Director, her conversation with the Knight Commander had ended with his decision that the Knights’ Order itself would be going to the site of Mr. Gouda’s discovery, and in order to navigate there, he would be coming to Harré directly in order to retrieve the map. That’s what seemed to have

angered the Director.

“I could have just shown him the map using the Mirror! Why does he need to go out of his way to come cause a ruckus in here?!”

There are magical devices called “Morgue Mirrors” that allow one to communicate at a distance with someone else. They are special mirrors that were made a long time ago using ancient techniques, and with them, one is able to speak with any other person who also has a Mirror. As there aren’t that many of them, they are quite valuable, and certainly nothing I’d ever be wealthy enough to own. There are currently five in the country, one in the King’s palace of Castle Shuzelk, one with the Knights’ Order, one in Harré’s Sorcerers’ Guild, and in the homes of two out of the Three Great Houses: the House of Bunachiel and the House of Mozfalt. The Third Great House, the House of Arnold, does not possess one.

There are several others scattered throughout other kingdoms and countries, but even so, I find it a bit strange that we have one here at Harré. I’m not exactly sure how long it’s been here, but our Guild has been one of the most important places in the Kingdom ever since its founding, so perhaps it’s not that much of a mystery.

“He told me that he’ll be bringing along the First and Eighth Platoon when he comes.”

“The First Platoon?” I ask.

“Nanalie?”

The First...?

I’d frozen at the word “First.” Zozo waves one hand in front of my eyes. “Hello?” she says, looking worried.

The Director is also apparently puzzled by my reaction, because she waves her hand in front of my face like Zozo is doing as well.

“He’s Captain of the First Platoon now, you know.”

I’m almost certain that’s what Nikeh had told me.

You’ve got to be kidding me. It isn’t enough that my private life is being

interrupted with worrying about him, now I've got to see his bastard face at work too! How did it come to this?

* * * *

It's suddenly gotten loud outside.

The doors are closed, so I can't hear what's going on very well, but I can tell there's something causing a commotion out there.

From Harré's windows, I catch glimpses of pegasi. *More than one of those creatures are walking around out there.* There's only one reason why such a large group of pegasi accompanied by their human riders would be outside Harré's door:

The Order of Knights has arrived.

Harré's heavy doors with their quiet, carefully oiled hinges swing open. In walks a man taller...no, *larger* than the average fellow, wearing his Knight's uniform.

"Is Theodora here?"

His cheeks are lined with several scars. *He's the type of man that seems like, every time he went out to battle, he survived by only the skin of his teeth. Those wounds must've been so deep, not even magic was able to heal them. Scarred though his face may be, he still looks every bit the brave hero.*

If he hadn't been wearing his uniform, he would've looked like a total bandit. Having said that, there's this mysterious sense of dignity he seems to possess that's present in every step he takes and every gesture he makes. *He'd be no ordinary bandit—he'd be the Bandit King.*

What am I even going on about?

"Director Locktiss, the Knight Commander has arrived."

I, who've been sitting at my reception desk and staring at the Knight Commander for several seconds, finally decide to alert the Director to her visitor. She'd been somewhere among the desks behind me, complaining about something or other to Alkes. I'd figured that she'd come up to the front to meet him sooner or later, having heard his voice when he came in, but she showed

no sign of slowing down her incessant whining to Alkes, even after the Commander called for her by name.

“Theodora, I’m here, so why don’t you come out and show your face?”

“...‘show—my—face—’? Hmm? Is *that* what you want?”

Zozo and I exchange glances. The Director wasn’t taking too kindly to the Commander’s words. Letting loose something like a *growl*, she stands up from her seat and begins making her way towards him.

Excellent, she’s finally gotten up.

Now Harré’s doors are flung open again. A cute little voice rings out like a bell in the reception area:

“Commander, please don’t leave me behind like that!”

It’s Nikeh. Her long blonde hair is no longer in pigtails but in one tight ponytail. Its light color stands in sharp contrast to the black Knight’s uniform she is wearing.

“Sir, we flew so quickly that we apparently left behind the First Platoon.”

That’s Prince Zenon’s voice. He comes in after Nikeh, glances back at the doors, and winces a little. “Nikeh, you practically *slammed* those doors open. This isn’t your dormitory back at the Order.”

“Oh, you’re right—sorry about that.”

The Prince’s black hair matches his black uniform. *“Noir” indeed. He doesn’t look like he’s changed a bit since I saw him six months ago.* Rockmann is, of course, taller than the Prince, but Prince Zenon is taller than me. *He’s certainly taller than the average adult man.* There are a lot of tall men in the Knights’ Order, but *he* is head and shoulders above even his fellow Knights. Or at least that’s the impression I have. I, on the other hand, am a bit taller than the average woman but not noticeably so. *I’m normal, really. It’s a bit frustrating to think that even when it comes to height, I’m somehow “less than” he is.* Grown up and independent as I may be, I am still a sore loser when it comes to *him*.

“I can’t see the First’s pegasi yet—can you?”

“The First Platoon is going at their own pace, like they always do. There’s no

panicking or rushing for members of the First, that's for sure."

The Director had said earlier that the First and the Eighth Platoons were coming today. That must mean Nikeh and the Prince are members of the Eighth. Rockmann is with the First, so he's not in the same platoon as them.

I make eye contact with Nikeh and the Prince, giving them both a smile and a bow in greeting. Nikeh's smile is so adorable that it makes me feel even happier to see them.

Several other Knights come into Harré after them. It's not noisy so much as it's crowded. The sorcerers clustered on the other side of the room near the job board notice the entrance of the Knights and begin whispering to each other in excitement. The Knights, on the other hand, make no idle conversation whatsoever, and wait quietly in formation behind the Knight Commander.

"Hey, we did you the favor of coming all this way to get that map."

"Did me the favor'?!"

The Director emerges from behind the counter to confront the Commander. She points her finger at him and stabs it in the air, her rage plain as day.

"Did me the favor'? What a BEARDFACE thing to say!"

She's getting a little violent with her language, but her left hand, holding the map, is steady.

"Good grief, there was absolutely no need for you to come with such a crowd for an errand as simple as this. Take it and begone!"

Complaining all the while, she hands the map over to the Commander. Business finished, she immediately turns around and goes back behind the reception counter.

"No need to get all grumpy with me, Theodora. Oh right, there's someone who I'd like to re-introduce you to—"

At the Commander's words, the doors to Harré open once more, and a tall man dressed in a pitch-black robe comes in all the way to stand before the Director. On his robes are embroidered the flowers of the Kingdom.

He has a hood over his head, so I can't see his face very well, but he is the

spitting image of a mage. His garments look exactly like those worn by the Great Wizards I'd seen in picture books as a child. He's carrying around a long golden cane, and it looks somewhat like my own Cudgel of the Goddess, *Dare Labdos*. (Mine's silver and his is gold, however.)

Several other people come following in after him dressed in much the same manner. *The shorter ones must be women, given the long hair I see spilling out from under their hoods.*

The man takes one more step forward, lifts a hand to his hood, and faces the Director.

"You are as beautiful as the rumors claim, my lady. Allow me to introduce myself: I am Captain of the First Platoon, Alois Hades Rockmann."

Wait, who?

Or so I think for a second.

He lifts back his hood to reveal slightly curly golden hair. He shakes his head a little and it straightens out, gently falling to his shoulders. Above his smiling lips is his sharp, aquiline nose and almond eyes with those pupils reminiscent of red flames.

I can't help but think: *this again?*

The man is Alois Rockmann. *Him.*

"Oh my! Well aren't you a good man, the complete opposite of Grove over there! Why, it's enough to make a woman blush," she says, smiling brightly as she shakes his hand.

Ugh. This bastard's gotten to the point where he's hitting on my boss.

Director Locktiss's cheeks are flushed red. *Director, you're completely mistaken about him. He's completely fooling you with that gentlemanly appearance. Don't fall for it.* I look suspiciously at Rockmann, trying to puzzle him out. *What's with that getup? It doesn't look very Knightly at all.*

The others behind him, however, are dressed in the same way. The ones who came in after the Knight Commander, on the other hand, are all wearing the normal Knight uniform.

“The First Platoon is a collection of individuals who are all particularly gifted with the use of magic. We normally keep them in our rearguard during battles, but they do their jobs when I order them to strike the finishing blow on our enemies. I’ve set up the Morgue Mirror so that Alois, in addition to Zenon, can use it from here on out. Should you ever need anything when I’m not around, they’ll take care of it. I do hope you’ll get along with them.”

It sounds a bit strange for a unit to “strike the finishing blow” from behind the front lines. Perhaps they’re more like weapons of last resort than normal fighters? Hmmm... Lost in thought, I sweep my gaze across the room—and lock eyes with *him*.

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

We glare at each other for a few seconds (actually, he just looked at me normally), and then I look away, back down to my hands, which are holding a pure white request form.

I can’t do anything stupid like allowing my own personal loathing for Rockmann to influence how I perform my job. Nor do I want to think about all that at the moment. He’s working right now too, so I doubt he wants to start trouble with me.

Oh, but now that I think of it, this might be a good chance to return that white dress. If I miss this opportunity, I’ll have to go back to that mansion myself. It’s an enormous pain for commoners to send a package to nobility, so I can’t just take the “simpler” method of mailing it to him. Just sending Maris that one letter took a lot of effort, so I can’t imagine what I’d have to go through in order to get that dress delivered.

Well, I suppose that if by coming here, he’s saved me a lot of trouble, I don’t mind him being around too much. It actually feels like a great, dress-sized weight has been lifted off my shoulders.

“I should mention that we didn’t come here just for this map.”

“What, then?”

“Well, we haven’t eaten lunch yet.”

“Excuuuuse me?”

The Director is practically hysterical as she reacts to this latest line from the Commander. “So what?” she says.

“We’ll be eating our lunch here. No worries, we brought money, so there’s no need to treat us to a meal.”

“If you’d asked me to treat you to lunch, I’d be throwing you out the door faster than you can say ‘bunny-bird.’” With a *harumph* of displeasure, the Director shakes her head and waves the Knights towards the dining area.

* * * *

Among the Knights wearing those black robes is a very, very beautiful woman. “Captain Alois,” she says, calling out to Rockmann.

She’s a beauty of a different sort than Nikeh. If Nikeh’s the type of girl whose beauty is a sort of soft aura she carries with her, this other girl’s beauty is like a red or orange frisson that she wears like a carefully polished coat of armor, the type of beauty that would complement someone who had a calmer feel to them, like a blue or a green. She’s sitting next to Rockmann right now, and they’re eating lunch together.

I don’t have any particular reason to be troubled any further with the Knights and their business, so here I am at my reception desk, quietly performing my duties. Waiting, as I am, for another client to come ask me for assistance, my gaze strays, from time to time, over to where the Knights and sorcerers are having their lunch.

“Captain, please have this. I’ve not yet touched it.”

“Oh, thanks. You don’t want it?”

“I’m quite alright.”

“No need to push yourself. Here, eat half.”

“Th-thank you very much.”

Hm, so she’s a “good girl,” isn’t she. Rockmann is now patting the head of that beautiful woman I was describing earlier. Her light brown hair looks soft and pleasant to the touch. He’s slowly running his left hand from the roots of her

hair down to the edges of her locks.

Unbelievable. Who in their right mind goes around flirting with women in a place like this?

I get the feeling that if he was the last man in the world, he'd marry multiple women and build up quite the harem without a moment's hesitation.

Even so, should Rockmann be the very last man alive, I would never join his harem.

I notice the Director and the Knight Commander are in the middle of talking about work when something on the job board seems to catch his eye. "One of those posters is here, too?" he mumbles. I follow his line of sight and see that he's looking at the "**Seeking Ice Witches!**" flier that had come from the Kingdom of Orcinus.

"That? Right, the thing from Orcinus. It passed MCFT inspection, so I've allowed it to be posted here, but I have my suspicions about it."

The MCFT is a Royal institution that examines all goods coming into Doran to determine whether or not they are legal within the Kingdom. Their full name is the "Ministry of Customs and Foreign Trade."

"I don't think there'd be too many 'Ice Maidens' around these parts," the Commander says, looking around the room.

"We have Nanalie here working for us, but I hope she isn't tempted by those salary numbers. I'd be quite beside myself if she told me she was leaving for the money."

She looks at me, smiling. I know what she's trying to ask.

"I'd never apply for something like that. I'm not a 'maiden,' after all."

"WHAT?!"

"Huh? Wh-What?"

Nikeh, who'd been busy eating until a moment ago, is now staring at me, jaw hanging open. The utensils she'd been using to eat fall with a *clang*, and she lets out a sort of strangled yell.

The Director is also staring, blinking her eyes rapidly as she sizes me up.

What in the world is all this fuss about?

“Dear, you really aren’t a maiden?”

“No, I mean, a maiden at my age? That’s not a thing, right?”

“Well, I suppose you may have a point there...”

The Director is stroking her chin in thought, muttering to herself. “I guess I, too, at that age...”

“NnnnGAH! This paper’s burning up!”

As I’m looking over at the Director, completely confused, the pure white request form that I’ve been holding in my hands goes up in flames, and in an instant, turns into ash.

After I’ve managed to lift my eyes away from the ash that’s fallen all over my knees and the floor, I look over at Zozo.

“Pestrokraive? Don’t worry about it, it’ll go away soon enough. We also have a lot of other request forms, so don’t concern yourself over losing it.”

“Well, sure, but...”

When someone is in an unstable emotional state and they’ve lost their temper, there’s this phenomenon called “pestrokraive” (strange game) that can occur even without the caster consciously invoking a spell. All the magical energy stored up inside flashes out and tends to cause accidents like this.

It’s over in an instant, but for families that have children who tend to lose their tempers easily, it’s no small matter. Up until now, however, I’ve never let myself get worked up into a state where I feel like I’m going to explode, so I don’t have any prior experience with this.

I don’t think I felt anything “explosive.” At most, I felt a very strong desire to punch Rockmann (for the millionth time) after seeing his irritating face, but the magic didn’t express itself that way. In that case, whose feelings caused those flames, and why in the world were they feeling like that?

“Hey, you.”

Just as I'm cleaning up the ash with a spell, I realize that Rockmann has left behind the members of his platoon and is making his way towards me. There's no question who he wants to talk to: he stops and stands directly before me.

With his height and that black robe, he actually looks a bit intimidating. But what does he want with me? I look at him with a slight frown on my face. I realize that I shouldn't be making that sort of face at work and I freeze up for a moment.

"Eek!"

From behind the golden hair of his bangs I catch glimpses of his narrowed, crimson eyes... He's glaring at me. With a face like his, so scarily symmetrical and with such perfectly sharp features, what I feel is not "attraction" but fear when I look at him. *But I can't allow myself to be afraid of some fool like Rockmann. As if I'd ever forgive myself if this is the moment I finally give in and admit defeat. Maybe he's come to start a fight.*

From behind the counter, I slowly lift both my hands up into attack position, ready to rumble.

"When did you stop being a maiden?"

"Excuse me?"

"When?"

He slowly bears down on me from above, his face getting closer with every question. I try to maintain some distance between us, and I find myself bending backwards to keep myself from getting too close.



“When?” What kind of question is that? And why would he care?

“I don’t really know how to answer that,” I say. He’s getting too close now. I push back against his chest and avert my gaze. It’s not like I’ve done anything bad. Why’s he acting like this? Who cares about whether I’m a maiden or not? Furthermore, who gives a fig about “when,” exactly, I stopped being a maiden? What kind of person spends their time thinking about such things?

I’m already eighteen years old. After graduating from school, I’m not in any kind of position where I can go around calling myself a “maiden.”

“Since graduation,” I say.

“With who?”

“Who?”

What in the world is he going on about?

“Aaaanyway! Why would you need to know about something like that?! Who cares whether I’m a maiden or not?! Do you want to become some little maiden?!”

“I simply thought that you were putting on airs with all that talk about not being a maiden. Nothing more, nothing less. It’s alright.”

“What is ‘alright’?! Do you understand what exactly you’re saying? I don’t think I’ve been asked about such nonsense in my entire life.”

What a weird guy. What did he mean by “putting on airs”? That’d be strange of me to do, wouldn’t it? Maybe he’s just an idiot?

“Captain Alois?”

“Don’t you think the Captain looks a little off?”

Shoot. I forgot to watch my language when speaking with this bastard. He’s a noble, just like Prince Zenon, after all. Now that I think of it, I’m pretty sure I’ve always spoken my mind around him, holding nothing back.

“Captain? We have to finish up eating here soon, so...” The female Knight that Rockmann had been eating with earlier has now gotten up to urge him to return to the table. Where he’d been sitting, I see a half-eaten plate of meat

and vegetables.

What a lovely meal he just up and abandoned. Bizarre. Lunch is the most important time of day, and he pays it no mind! Quit trying to start something here with me and get back to eating. I try to communicate that to him with a glare, but my gaze locks not with his crimson eyes but a pair of blue ones.

He looks back at me with a questioning look in his eyes. I feel something race down my spine. It's different and stronger than what I felt when he was asking me about my status as a maiden.

For some reason I can't understand, the female Knight standing next to Rockmann is looking right at me with an expression utterly devoid of any emotion.

"Forgive me for saying this to you when we've just met," she says. I'm trying not to blink too much in surprise. "But are you aware of who, exactly, you are addressing with that tone of yours?"

I think I just blinked one hundred times in one second. My eyebrows are twitching.

"There's no way someone working at Harré wouldn't know who this is," she says. There's an edge to her voice as she addresses me. That and the strange look in her eyes contrast sharply with the image given by her soft, silky brown hair that falls down her back. She's tilting her head to one side right now as she looks at me, and all that beautiful hair flows down over her left shoulder. She takes one hand and slides her hair back behind her ears, exposing the clean, perfect lines of her neck.

Of course, she's a looker... or so I think, like an old man would, before I say:

"No, well, you see...*ahem*," I can't quite finish speaking before I swallow my words in anxiety. *Yeah, I'm not imagining it—this woman's lecturing me, right here, right now.* I look back at Rockmann, and he doesn't seem to be concerning himself much with what's going on. He's calm, cool, and collected as he looks at me, giving nothing away.

Wait, he's not just looking at me—he's observing me. Somehow I find that even more irritating.

I slowly drop my hands down to my sides as I turn back to face the true cause of all this trouble: Rockmann. I feel like that other woman's going to cut me to pieces if I look back at her, and I don't have the courage to go through that right now. I'm not about to get into an argument with someone from the Order, let alone a woman I just met.

The quiet rattle of the ceiling fan above us is audible over the silence between us.

"He-hey now, what's your deal? Nanalie, you've done nothing you need to worry about, okay?"

Zozo steps beside me and puts one arm around my shoulder as I stand in front of the beautiful woman with the oddly menacing attitude. She must've been worried about me, trying to find some gap in the conversation where she could tactfully step in and stop the drama from spiraling further out of control. *I do nothing but cause her trouble.*

"Ms. Zozo," I say, trying to admit that the whole thing is my fault, but before I can finish, the brown-haired woman has *slammed* one hand down on the counter, shoulders heaving in irritation.

Even Zozo jumps at that.

I don't really understand what's going on, but whatever it is, it's not good.

"I was not speaking to *you*," the woman says to Zozo. "I was speaking to *her*," she says, jutting her chin at me. *What a waste. Her lovely, beautiful face is totally ruined by that awful expression. She looks as though she's chewing on some bitter insect. Such a shame, being that beautiful and not showing it off with a smile.*

My father had always said that no matter how old a girl is, she's always the most beautiful when she's smiling. My mother, however, upon hearing that, had gotten irritated for some weird reason and said, "You're not going around saying that to just anybody now, are you?"

"This is Harré!" Zozo says. "It doesn't matter who you are or what family you're from when you step through those doors."

"What an ignorant thing to say. Is Harré full of other rude people like

yourself?”

I could hear something audibly *snap* inside Zozo when the woman said those words to her.

“HAH?! Stars above, you Knights think *very* highly of yourselves now don’t you?”

Zozo’s professional manner has disappeared in an instant. *That snap I heard earlier must have been the breaking point for her patience. Does Rockmann like this person who’s going off on us right now?* I blush a little as I try sneaking a glance at him from the corner of my eyes. The way he looks right now reminds me very clearly of those days when he was surrounded by all those noble young ladies back at school.

It’s something that’s just become clear to me now, but I realize that all the girls that have liked him have tended to be the bold, outspoken sort. Maris had been that way, and the fangirling classmates had been that way as well. Perhaps I’m taking this too far, but this woman next to Rockmann right now is bringing back all those feelings I’d struggled to hold in check when arguing with those noble girls that clung to Rockmann.

“Hold up! There’s no good that’ll come of starting a ruckus here.” Nikeh’s gotten up from the table where she was eating and is now standing between Zozo and the other woman, hands held out to keep them apart.

“Nikeh, I—”

“No, Nanalie, you’re not to blame for this.” She looks quite apologetic as she cuts off my attempt to take responsibility for the commotion. *I’m the one who should be apologizing here.*

I catch a fragment of something Nikeh’s muttering under her breath: “Good grief, when it involves Nanalie, it always gets like this...tsktsk.” *So I am to blame.* I feel awful.

I’ve caused all this trouble. The Director’s sure to scold me now. I look away from the women around me to see how the Director’s taking this—and there she is, next to the Commander, both of them watching the scene developing before them with something that looks like amused interest, smiles wide and

eyes bright.

By the Goddess! What do they have to be so excited about? Just a little while ago they'd been practically snarling at each other, but now they're cheerfully commentating on this spectacle like they're the best of friends. What's that about? Why's the Director suddenly so buddy-buddy with the Commander?

The other Knights are looking over at us now as well, whispering as they glance back and forth between me and the other women. Prince Zenon seems to have been watching Rockmann closely for some time. He doesn't look at Nikeh or me, nor does he seem like he's about to intervene in our little scuffle.

I notice that all the sorceresses who are turning this way to see what's going on take one look at Rockmann and blush, red as can be. Rockmann himself doesn't seem to understand the looks he's drawing, his gaze fixed on me and the other women. *Ridiculous. You're all grown women, surely you can refrain from blushing at the mere sight of an attractive man?*

"But Brunel, for her to speak like that to the Captain is simply unforgivable. Only His Highness the Prince and the Knight Commander talk to him like that."

"I think you'd better calm down. You've got to stop flying off the rails every time your Captain starts a conversation with someone. Unless, of course, you don't mind if you're transferred to another platoon?"

"But, but I can't..." The brown-haired woman trails off as Nikeh gently pats her shoulder, trying to comfort her.

Hmmm...well that's that, but still.

Right now, I am technically on the clock, working. Rockmann's not someone who's come to seek services from the receptionists at Harré, and I'd tried so hard not to let my personal feelings interfere with my work while he was present inside the Guild, but I'd slipped up and spoken to him a bit *unprofessionally*, despite the circumstances.

No matter how absurd his questions, no matter how irritatingly he asks them, there is no excuse for me to lash out at him in response. Still, what had she meant by asking if I "knew who he was?" Had she been referring to the fact he's a Captain? The son of a Duke? That his title is Marquess Cheese Fondue? (Note:

his real title is “Marquess Fodeuri.”)

The more I think about it, the less I understand. *A guy this perplexing makes himself my enemy just by existing.*

I cast my eyes downward. My blue hair falls down to hang over my chest. It’s not exactly relevant to what’s going on around me, but the following thought passes through my mind: *That calm, refreshing blue really matches the white of my uniform, doesn’t it?*

“Forgive me, I am fully aware of his station and status. Pardon my indiscretion.”

I shall not bring my personal feelings into this. I shall not bring my personal feelings into this.

That’s all that’s running through my mind as I decide I might as well say I’m sorry. I bow in apology to the woman.

I hear Nikeh let out a small *gasp* at the sight of my bow.

“Weldy, I don’t want you misunderstanding what’s going on here.” I suddenly realize that *someone* has stuck their elegant, hard finger quite forcefully against the middle of my forehead.

“H—n?”

I was in the middle of trying to bow to the woman, but I’ve been stopped halfway. At the corner of my vision I can see the black sleeve of a robe—the one poking my head right now is Rockmann.

For a guy who’s usually so sweet on women, I’m a little surprised to hear how sharp and cold a tone he’s taking with this woman. *Hadn’t he been the type to say embarrassing little lines like, “gotta treat all girls right,” or some such when he was hitting on one girl or another?*

As that’s going through my mind, I stubbornly try to go through with my bow, only to find that, slowly but surely, my head is being forced back to its upright position by Rockmann’s unyielding pressure.

“Captain?”

“Weldy” must be the name of the woman next to him. She’s got one eyebrow

raised in confusion at the way Rockmann's touching me. *What the hell is he intending to do now?*

I try to force back his finger by pushing against it with my head, but it's rather strong. His finger's more likely to puncture my skull before I'm able to budge it. *It hurts so much, I feel like he's actually going to make a hole in my head.*

"He-hey—"

No need to push that hard!

I screw up both my eyes to focus on the finger pressing against my forehead. It slowly moves down to directly between my eyes, and then brushes down along the bridge of my nose.

"I do not allow this woman to bow to me."

His finger's now pressing against my lips.

"I do not allow her to speak politely to me, either."

He's holding my chin with one hand.

My head's slightly tilted upwards, and I feel him tracing the edge of my lower lip with his thumb.

His head is ever so slightly tilted to one side, and he has a small smile on his face.

His golden locks are resting against his black collar, and his cheeks have a pale tinge to them, lighter than the average man's.

"Um...Captain...Alois?"

"This woman is my friend, and you have no place to say anything about my relationship with her. I was the one who was indiscreet; I apologize, my Lady Receptionist."

I don't recall ever becoming friends with him, but unusually for him, he's got this pained look on his face and averts his gaze when I try to make eye contact. I stare right at him, but he refuses to look at me.

In contrast to his words, however, I still feel his thumb gently pushing against my lower lip. *Is he seriously apologizing to me, or just playing around?*

...Does he find prodding my lip that entertaining?

Hurry up and get your hand off me!

I don't say that out loud. It was so unexpected for him to apologize to me that I kinda felt like the wind had been taken out of my sails.

Maybe I should just bite his finger and gnaw it to pieces. Surprisingly, however, I too decide to refrain from pushing this any further, and like the adult I am, my mouth remains closed.

I look over at the woman (Weldy?) and see that she's looking at us with her eyes wide. *Those blue eyes of hers look like they're about to pop right out of their sockets.* She's gripping the sleeves of her robes, shaking a little. *Hold on, is she about to cry? That's absurd, she can't go crying over something like this!*

"Um, I—"

"Yes?"

"Hehehehe."

Rockmann's got this suspicious look in his narrowed eyes as he watches me try to open my mouth to say something. Finally, he removes his hand from my mouth and lips. I leap at the chance and bow all the way down. "My sincerest apologies for my earlier indiscretion, Sir Alois Rockmann. I am woefully inexperienced in the aristocratic formalities, and, truly, I am just as naive as this woman proclaims me to be."

He doesn't reply.

"Whatever seems to be the matter, Sir Alois Rockmann?" I tilt my head to one side and lower my eyebrows, trying to look meek and mild-mannered.

"Is that how this is going to go?"

Rockmann seems to have picked up on my cheeky plan. He massages his furrowed eyebrows with his fingers, closing his eyes as if in thought.

"Nanalie, you...?"

Nikeh holds one hand over her mouth, glancing sideways at the Knight next to her. She, the Knight with the brown hair, looks beyond dismayed. *This "Weldy"*

woman seems to have gotten into the habit of being insufferably polite to Rockmann. For her to see Rockmann suddenly become irritated when I act like a polite, mild-mannered woman must be not just confusing, but discomforting to her as a woman, believing that she's been pleasing him all the while with her ever-so-refined manner of addressing her Captain.

Two birds with one stone, that's what this strategy is. No matter what happens, I benefit. After all, if Rockmann tells me not to do something, I want to do it all the more.

I'd thought I'd die before I ever spoke to him like that, but in this world, you can't go around speaking your mind to whomever however you please and expect to get by without any trouble.

I'm giggling internally at the sight of the *immensely* displeased expression on his face. That smoking sense of unease I'd felt upon his appearance at Harré is gone, replaced with the clear, refreshing blue skies of self-satisfaction.

Surely this will be enough to stop him. Not even he, a renowned ladykiller, is going to make a scene by making this girl shed tears here in front of her co-workers.

"Thanks," he says. He's got a grimace on his face as he thanks me (for what I have no idea).

"Huh?"

Hold on. Stop just one moment—did Rockmann just tell me "thanks?" That's strange. But he's been acting strange ever since he arrived. Now, he's not only apologized to me, but thanked me as well—just what in the world has come over him? For someone who was just pestering me about my status as a non-maiden, he sure is acting rather mature now.

"But your 'polite' way of talking is starting to annoy everyone, so would you mind kindly cutting it the hell out?"

"Mature" my ass.

"Oh no sir," I say, with a big, fake smile on my face, "that is quite out of the question."

“This’ll end with your hair getting burnt.”

“In that case, would you prefer that I cool down your honored self with some freshly materialized ice? It’s a bit warm outside today, so I think you’ll find it most refreshing. Let’s get you chilled down ’til you’re frozen stiff...ngh!”

He claps one hand over my entire mouth and forces my lips shut.

“Sher, huar ew o’ng?” (Sir, what’re you doing?)

My lips stick out at odd angles from between his fingers, distorting my speech. He’s pinching my cheeks inward, very likely making my face look quite ugly. I guess this because Nikeh has a particular look on her face, the kind of face one makes when looking at a distinctly pathetic creature.

“Commander Grove.”

“Wha-What’s going on?”

The instant Rockmann begins to remove his hand from my face, I attempt to freeze it, but Rockmann, of course, is too quick to allow that. He evaporates my ice with a quick burst of his flames, leaving nothing but a thick cloud of steam in the air.

That cloud of steam, however, blows right into my face. It makes my bangs float upwards. It’s all over so quickly that I can’t tell if the steam was hot or cold when it blasted my face.

“It’s about the psychometry, sir—wasn’t the original plan to have someone from Harré come along with us?” Rockmann casually glances back at me as he asks the Knight Commander the question.

Dude, get your hands off me. You gonna fix this face if you break it?

“Oh right, I think so.”

The Director interrupts before the Commander can elaborate further. “The plan was,” she says, “to have Alkes, Zozo, and that Nanalie you’re tangled up with over there go with you to do it.” She points at me when she says my name. *Is she laughing right now? Please, Director, enlighten me: just what part of the current situation do you find amusing?*

“Is that so?”

“Commander, we’ve come all this way—why don’t we bring along those three from Harré?”

“Yeah?”

“It sounds like some of them are still in the process of learning how to perform psychometry, and anyhow, they’d originally planned to go by themselves anyway, right?”

“Well yes,” the Director says, letting out a snort of laughter as she looks at me.

“I want to teach her,” Rockmann says. “I want to teach this cute little receptionist how to perform psychometry.”

“How to perform psychometry.”

He brushes his bangs aside with the hand *not* clamped over my mouth and looks at me as if he is seeing something quite pleasing to the eye, smiling as if he’s enjoying himself.

“Yewrshesteece’oturshhh!” (You worthless piece of trash!)

Then, at last, my ice beats his flames.

I freeze his whole arm solid. Weldy, standing next to him, witnesses my trespass and slams her fist right into my face, causing yet another raucous tussle. *The fight goes on.*

* * * *

The wind on this clear, bright day blows pleasantly against my skin. Riding on Lala’s back as we fly through the sky makes me feel all the more relaxed. Her white, soft Lykos fur shifts in waves against the wind.

“When’re these gonna go away?” I mumble, rubbing the two bumpy bruises on my forehead.

“Lady Nanalie, it’d be best if you didn’t touch them all that much.”

I pay no mind to the sound of the Knights around me talking to each other and simply gaze down on the pretty landscapes of the Kingdom below us, shifting from town to farm to town again as we fly.

There are two large bumps on my forehead, sticking out like deserted islands in the white sea of my forehead. The one on my left side is a little bigger than the other.

Ouch, these really hurt. I *tap tap tap* against them with my fingers, hoping they'll subside quickly.

Zozo pulls up on her familiar, Purl, next to me. She sounds a bit exasperated as she calls out to me, having apparently noticed how much I'm massaging these bruises. "You should've just used a healing spell."

"Hel seems like she could heal those bruises out of sheer spite." Alkes has pulled up on the other side of me, riding on top of his phoenix familiar, as he calls out to Zozo.

We're currently flying towards the forest along with the Order of Knights. The Knights are on their pegasi, while we are riding our familiars. The Knights are flying in formation. The Eighth Platoon is ahead of us, the First Platoon behind us. It had been the Knight Commander who'd invited us to accompany them on this mission, so we're flying a bit closer to the Eighth.

Rockmann and Weldy are both in the First, behind us. Rockmann's flying at the back of the First's formation, the tail end of our whole group.

I'm overthinking things, of course, but it feels like he's got me cornered from behind. Not that I'd prefer him to be in front of me either, but still, I don't like it. I gripe about it to Zozo, and she just shakes her head and laughs. "You sound like one of those sorcerers who are always trying to pick a fight." I decide to keep my mouth shut after that. I don't want to sound like I'm some vindictive, petty person, but if I'm being honest with myself, I know I can be pretty vindictive when it comes to Rockmann. *Suppose it's too late to do anything about that aspect of my character anyway.*

"I can't use a healing spell on these," I say, pointing at my bruises. "It'd be a waste of magical power."

"You're just torturing yourself," she says in return.

"I shall *never* allow myself to forget this agony."

My poor head, victim of Weldy's rock-hard fist.

The worst thing about the whole situation is that just after she'd punched me the first time, she punched me *again* in the middle of her apology for the first punch! *If you're going to apologize, I'd really rather you not hit me like that.* Still, I suppose I'd been the one to lose my composure first, and I'm used to getting beat up after all my fights with Rockmann during our school days. *Her punch was much weaker than I remember his being. It was almost cute.* Once we'd both managed to calm down a little, we apologized to each other, this time without punches. "I'm sorry," she'd said, "but when it's something involving the Captain, I just..." She'd looked completely beside herself when she'd said that. I had actually felt something like pity for her, and comforted her with words like, "Oh that's quite alright, hit me as much as you'd like, I won't get mad. I'm also to blame for what happened."

He, being the bastard that he is, had completely relieved her of all her distress by gently patting her head, whispering, "That was a good punch you threw at her." He'd said it with a gloating smile on his face, as if he'd beat me at something.

Weldy had probably been nervously anticipating a firm scolding from Rockmann, but he'd praised her instead, so she must have felt a great deal of relief at being complimented by him. Or so I decide to think.

Now, I can see that she's flying in the far back, next to Rockmann. Surveying the rest of the members of the First Platoon, I notice she's the only woman in the entire unit. There are about six other women in the Eighth Platoon along with Nikeh. *Each platoon must have some sort of special characteristic like that.*

The Eighth Platoon has twenty members. The First, however, has only ten. *The First Platoon has rather different duties than the Eighth, so I suppose that's understandable.*

"We're heading down to the forest! All units, follow my lead."

And so, with those words from the Knight Commander, we descend as one.

* * * *

"This is the place on the map."

We see the large lake in the middle of the forest as we are descending.

After we land deep in the eastern part of the forest, I get off Lala's back, shrink her, and set her on my shoulder. The pegasi apparently don't shrink, so the Knights are having them rest near the edge of the lake. With thirty of them crowded so close together, the whinnying and baying is approaching the level of a dim roar, making them all the more amusing to watch.

"Let's set up a barrier around the perimeter."

At the orders of the Knight Commander, the black-robed members of the First Platoon materialize a transparent, magical shield around us.

"Waibars pulunkt." (Thwart Evil.)

"Amraia." (Defending Wall.)

"Noumos." (Avert.)

Ms. Weldy is casting the spells, just like the rest of her platoon. Rockmann, Captain that he is, is giving instructions to the Knights under his command.

"Let's cast over there as well."

Personally, I find that dynamic a bit odd; don't the other Knights in his unit find it irritating to be ordered around by someone younger than themselves? Then again, perhaps it isn't odd at all—Rockmann looks a great deal more mature than he did back in our school days. Someone who doesn't know either of us might not even guess we're the same age, but still—even Ms. Weldy is a year or two older than us, and yet she follows his orders without complaint.

There is something odd, however, in the manner they all so *incessantly* refer to him as "Captain."

"The lake's beautiful," I say. I stand there on the edge of the lake, lost in my thoughts as my gaze wanders over the clear, emerald water.

I'd never imagined that there was such a large lake in the depths of the forest. When I asked Satanás and Benjamine about the site where they'd found Mr. Gouda, I pictured the lake to be something not much larger than a pond.

One of the men from the Eighth Platoon sees me looking at the lake and comes over to speak to me. "You know," he says, "I've heard that a long time ago, mermaids lived in these waters."

“Is that so?”

Mermaids are widely known to be rare, real beings that exist not only in legends, but in faraway seas where they are occasionally sighted. They aren’t regarded as “magical creatures,” and while perhaps they aren’t quite recognized as “humans” either, most tend to think of them as the “people who live in the sea.”

“That’s amazing. It looks even more beautiful to me now,” I say.

The forest is dark, but the surface of the lake is quietly sparkling in the sunlight.

“It’s said that mermaids can turn into the most beautiful people when they wish to walk on land.” He pauses, and then looks at me with a small smile on his face. “My lady, you wouldn’t happen to be a mermaid yourself now, would you?”

“Oh my, I’m certainly nothing of the sort. Why, even mermaids would find a man-eating piranha like myself to be too much to welcome into their society,” I say, laughing a little at my own joke.

“I’ll be the one who performs the psychometry.”

The Knight and I look over to the source of the voice. It’s the Knight Commander, and he’s standing next to a very large fallen tree at the lake’s edge. From the report Satanás had written, I knew that they’d found Mr. Gouda collapsed near that tree.

“Nanalie,” Zozo says, walking over to take my hand and lead me towards the fallen tree. Mr. Alkes is there, motioning for us to stand next to him.

“We just can’t leave you alone now, can we?” he says with a twinkle in his eyes. “The minute we do, someone starts hitting on you.”

“Hitting on me?”

“Anyways, right now we gotta focus on this psychometry, ’kay?”

Mr. Alkes looks at the tree. I notice that the First Platoon has finished casting the defensive spells and has returned from the perimeter to gather around us, along with the members of the Eighth Platoon.

The Commander stares at the tree in question, holds out his right hand, and begins spinning one of his fingers in little half-circles. Around and around he spins his finger, continuing the gesture for several dozen seconds until a black mist begins to form. The cloud of mist grows and grows until it has covered everything surrounding us.

The events of the past are projected onto the mist. There in the darkness, Mr. Gouda appears—being dragged along by that human-like demon. *Well, that should erase any doubts about what happened. The demon definitely did something to him.*

“Nikeh, look there—it’s standing on two legs, the freaky bastard.”

“Ugh, it’s *revolting*.”

Prince Zenon and Nikeh are watching from a little ways away. I catch their attention and they edge near me, grim expressions on their faces. Nikeh comes up next to me, rubbing her arms as if she has a chill. Prince Zenon stands on the other side.

“Is that the demon that you said looked like a human? It’s creepy, even for a demon.”

“Well, we still don’t know where, exactly, the demon started dragging him from... Hold on, is it trying to eat him?” Prince Zenon frowns as he watches the demon move about inside the psychometric projection. It’s lowering its head close to Mr. Gouda’s neck, and then, of all things, it bit him.

Unconscious as he was, Mr. Gouda didn’t seem to feel any pain, flinching not in the slightest at the bite.

“Did he really...not have any evidence of a wound on his body?” The Commander, continuing to cast the spell, glances over at us Harré employees and makes eye contact with Mr. Alkes, his rough, sharply featured visage revealing nothing of what he’s thinking.

“None.”

“As far as I can tell, it sure looks like he’s being bitten, but...”

Its jaws are moving, *chomp*, in a way that certainly looks as though it’s taking

a bite. But not only had there been no mention whatsoever of any injuries in the report, Benjamine had told me *directly* that “he had no injuries.” *I doubt that “bite” left any trace of a wound.*

“Look! Commander, the demon is moving away from the body!”

“Based on the direction of its movement, it looks as though it’s heading towards the Kingdom of Sheera.”

“Shall we attempt to follow after it?”

“No. We can’t go crossing borders. This lake here’s the farthest we can go. Let’s rewind the psychometry back further and look around the area for more clues. After we finish with today’s investigation, we’ll go over to meet this Gouda Krain tomorrow. Seems as though we’ll need to give him a full physical inspection.”

The Commander snaps his fingers and the magic is over. The image of the demon disappears.

“Yeah, this’ll be a good chance for some practice. With this many people here, you should be able to help each other out and review how to do an investigation using psychometry.”

The Knights disperse at the Commander’s orders and begin casting their spells at various places around the site. According to what Nikeh tells me, even in the Knights’ Order there aren’t too many people who can successfully cast that spell. In the First Platoon, only Rockmann and three other members can do it, or so she says.

Nikeh herself doesn’t seem to have grasped how to do it yet, and she’s continuing to crack her knuckles in nervous anticipation.

“Can you do it, Nanalie?” said the Prince.

“No, I cannot. What about you, Your Highness?”

I am making a point of referring to Prince Zenon as “Your Highness.” Back when we were students I’d referred to him as “Prince,” but as we’ve grown older, the situation’s changed. It would be inappropriate for me to go around calling him “Prince Zenon”—commoners are supposed to refer to royals by their

titles, not by their names.



The Prince seems to have a sense of what I'm thinking right now. He laughs a bit when he sees the expression on my face.

"Nah, I still can't do it," he says. "Still, it's a bit unusual, isn't it? For you not to be able to cast a spell."

"Well the magic *itself* doesn't cause me too much trouble, but that doesn't mean I can get anything useful out of it yet. I'm not so talented that I can master magic like that in mere days."

"Really? Huh. I guess no one is..."

I see Mr. Alkes is casting the spell on some grass nearby.

"Mr. Alkes," I say, "why are you able to use that spell so easily?"

"Who knows? In any case, it always helps to have as many tools available to use as possible, right?"

He's so skilled with his magic that he's continuing to spin his finger around, black mist growing thick, even as he continues his conversation with me. *He certainly doesn't lack for powers of concentration. The amount of focus that's necessary to successfully cast the spell should be too much to allow him to speak, but here he is, unwavering in his spellwork.*

Zozo doesn't seem satisfied with his answer. "I don't need a lecture about my toolkit," she says, looking rather desperate as she pushes him for answers. "What we *really* mean to ask is, 'Why can you cast the spell so easily when we can't?!'"

Zozo's the type of person who can generally cast any spell she wants, but these psychometry spells seem to be giving her trouble. Alkes, on the other hand, is a former Knight—perhaps that has something to do with it. *He quit the Order ten years ago. Doesn't that mean that he should know some of the other Knights here today? He's been acting like the Commander and the rest of the Order are all complete strangers to him.*

"Maybe it's because I like magic?" he says, his bluish-black hair shaking as he lets out a laugh.

"Why don't you take me seriously for once...? Whatever am I supposed to

make of that answer?”

“Sorry Zozo, it’s just that I’m not good at teaching others. I kinda, you know, let my intuition steer me around.”

“...Are you claiming to be a natural-born spellcasting genius?”

“Well, to put it nicely, yeah.”

Zozo starts chewing on her thumbnail in irritation. “Freaking geniuses! Pisses me off— ngh!”

Psychometry doesn’t require any verbal incantation, but according to the textbooks and reference materials I’ve seen, it does require a great deal of concentration. But just knowing that fact doesn’t help much—if you can’t concentrate, you can’t concentrate. No amount of book reading is going to help that.

“Captain Alois, is this—?”

“Yeah, for that you just—”

“Captain, what about over there?”

“Hm, alright, sure.”

On the other side of the lake, I can see that the talented First Platoon is proceeding rapidly with its area of investigation. They’re walking methodically along the edge of the lake side by side as they cast their spells. We Harré employees, on the other hand, are fumbling around in a haphazard, time-consuming manner. I feel as though any second Rockmann’s going to turn around and yell, “What’re you doing, wasting your time like that?”

I’d come prepared for him to lecture me about this and that on the specifics of the magic of psychometry after what he’d said to me back at Harré, but it doesn’t appear as though I’ll have to go through that. *What was that he’d said? “I want to teach this little Lady,” or something like that?* I’d felt like I’d swallowed a bug when I’d heard him say that.

Anyhow, he looks too busy teaching his unit how to do the spell to have any time for me. They’re far away, so I can’t quite make it out, but it looks as though Ms. Weldy and Rockmann are touching each other’s hands for some reason. *Is*

that what it means to “hold someone’s hand” when teaching them? I’m just watching Mr. Alkes and attempting to copy his posture as he performs the spell. No hand-holding going on here, that’s for certain.

“Nanalie, you’re working so hard!”

“Nikeh, I’m sure you can do this too.”

“No, I’m fine, thanks.”

I thrust out my left hand and make a circle with my thumb and index finger. With my right hand, I point my index finger into the circle, right at the target of the spell, and begin twirling it in a circle, round and round, counterclockwise, just as I’d read in the manual.

It seems like this should be enough for the spell to take effect, but if it was this easy, then everyone would be doing it. If concentration is what’s necessary to pull this spell off, then I’d even go so far as to find some waterfall hidden deep in the mountains and stand under it, all to train my ability to focus.

Failing that, I don’t think I’ll ever be able to do this spell.

“Ah...” I let out a sigh. Despite how tense my hands had been during my attempt to cast the spell, I’d felt nothing around me change.

“Still can’t do it?”

“Yyyiikkkeeeess!”

When did he get over here?!

Rockmann’s standing next to me. *Did he already finish his investigation of the lake’s perimeter? No, that can’t be it—I can still see members of the First Platoon going around and casting their psychometry spells.* In quick succession, I see the Knights move from one area to the next.

“Please don’t get in my way. I still have work to do, you know.”

He shrugs. “I got done with mine already, so I’m all good. Unlike yourself.”

How ’bout I blast you to smithereens, here and now? Something about the way he’s acting grabs my attention.

“What’s with the casual act?” I say, noting how he’s dropped the polite

manner he'd had on earlier. "You have a split personality or something?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. I just thought that you looked like you were struggling over here. You probably won't understand how to do it no matter how long you think about it, you know."

"Oh is that right?"

Dammit! Has this guy come all the way over here to make fun of me while I'm working?

There's something like amusement in his eyes as he looks down at me. I still haven't managed to produce anything with the spell.

And then on top of all that, I now see that Ms. Weldy's coming over here with two other Knights. She appears to still be laboring under the idea that she and I are somehow rivals, her lips twisted into a small, thin frown as she watches me.

You can love and respect him all you want, but please, leave me out of it. But maybe it isn't just her who's come to mock me. I hear something like stifled laughter coming from the two Knights behind her. At their appearance, Rockmann looks none too pleased. Well now, if this isn't a rare sight: Rockmann unhappy to see young women gathering around him.

"Ah, guess there's no helping it. What'd you eat for breakfast this morning?"

Rockmann takes the golden staff he's been carrying and passes it off to one of his subordinates, then walks around to stand directly across from me.

Why's he asking me about breakfast?!

I'm looking straight ahead at him, completely at a loss for words.

"Hello? You listening?"

He casually leans in towards me, looking at my eyes for signs of life.

I'd like to avoid having to look at his annoying face as much as possible, but if I turn away now, I'll feel like I've lost something, so I glare right back at him. *He's got no sense of personal space today! Maybe he's just trying to irritate me. Even if he is, I'm not about to back down. It would be unspeakably cowardly to desert my post in the line of fire.*

“...Shouldn’t you be busy finishing your work, way back over there? I’m trying to focus right now, so if you wouldn’t mind—”

“What did you eat for breakfast?”

I glare at him and clench my fists in frustration.

“There they go again,” Nikeh says from somewhere behind me.

“..Nikrom soup and pani.”

Oh well. I suppose I’ll answer his questions anyway.

“Did you make them yourself?”

“Well, yeah.”

“So then around what time did you wake up this morning?”

“Just before dawn.”

“That’s pretty early. But what time did you go to bed yesterday?”

“...Right after I ate dinner.”

“Did you brush your teeth?”

“I did.”

“What’d you have for dinner?”

“Yalnikka and green beans.”

“That so? By the way, what’s your style of pajamas?”

“Um, white... Hold on! What kind of question is that?! As if I need to tell you about my pajamas!”

What could he possibly be trying to get at?

“...Huh?”

At that very instant, light flashes out from the tree I’ve been attempting to cast the spell on. The light grows brighter, then dimmer, turning into white mist. After most of the mist dissipates, I notice that part of it’s moving strangely—it coalesces into the form of a small bird sitting atop a branch. It’s twitching and shuffling in a way that looks as though time is going in reverse. It leaves the

tree and flies away—backwards.

Could this be...?

“I just *knew* a simple technique like that would work on you.”

“What? No way, I did it?”

How?

This is a spell that I’d struggled with all night long, paging frantically through the manuals to figure out what I’d been doing wrong. It’s a spell that only a few Harré employees could cast—not even Zozo could do it yet.

I’d learned nothing useful when I’d asked for tips from those who could perform the spell. *To think that all it took to perform the spell was recalling what I ate for dinner last night—could it really have been that easy?*

“Psychometry is a type of magic that can only be *intuited*, not directly learned. There’s a limit to how much you can learn from textbooks, you know.”

“Then—then what were those earlier questions about?”

“I still didn’t think that you’d be able to pull it off even with those questions, but it seems like that method worked for you.”

“Th-thank—”

“You’re a simpleton, after all.”

I freeze in the face of his insult.

Simpleton.

All I’d wanted was to sincerely thank him for guiding me through the spell, but with an insult like that, all the motivation I had to say “thank you” goes right out the window. *Dear Goddess, I pray that all blond men who go around smiling as they call people simpletons are doomed to go bald at an early age as punishment for their impudence.*

Setting all that aside, I still think it’s incredible that I was able to cast the spell after being asked just a few questions. *All I’d done was go through my memories of yesterday. I can’t say I understand the principles of psychometry any better now, but I feel like I have gained that “intuition” necessary to*

successfully cast the spell after doing it once.

It's all thanks to the work of my superior intellect. Let me say that again: it is ALL thanks to MY superior intellect.

Still, I have to admit that Rockmann has "taught" me, just like he said he would. How frustrating.

I'm happy to have succeeded with the spell, but to have done so in such a shameful manner... I squeeze my eyes shut and muster every last ounce of patience I have in my body to say:

"Th...anks."

"What?"

And just like that, my gratitude is utterly crushed under the shrinking curse so breezily uttered by this *fool*.

If he really hadn't heard me, well, then there really isn't an issue, but he has that teasing look in his eyes. Truly, he is the lowest of the low. I'd made the effort to go and directly thank him, but evidently that had been completely pointless. I hate losing to other people, but I hate doing pointless things even more. But I suppose no one likes feeling like what they're doing is pointless.

"Nanalie, that's amazing! I think I'll try doing it too." Zozo's been watching me from the side and leaps into action to try the new "recall" technique herself. "I have a great memory after all!" She then launches into a detailed account of where she went last weekend, of all things.

Over the course of the next few minutes, I learn quite a bit about her everyday life outside of work.

"Dang, I can't do itttttt. Maybe I'll never be able to do it..."

No matter how much she goes through her memories, she isn't able to cast the spell. She hangs her head in defeat and drops her hands down to her sides.

I try to reassure her that isn't the case. "No, I think you'll—" Before I can finish my sentence, however, Rockmann interrupts me by stepping in front of Zozo, taking her hands in his own and lifting them back up. He's gentle with her, as if he's holding a wounded animal.

“No ma’am, you *will* be able to do it. For just as idiots have their idiotic methods, women like yourself have their own methods of learning spells. Unlike that simple woman next to you, I am sure that the mind of one so wise and beautiful works in entirely different ways. Please, continue to believe in yourself and your abilities.”

“GAH! I can’t with you!”

“There’s no need to rush things, right?” he said.

Zozo’s blushing as she looks at Rockmann.

I’d never *once* imagined that I’d witness the moment she fell for this *bastard*. *By now he’s gone after not only my boss, Director Locktiss, but Ms. Zozo as well! Does he intend to take everyone away from me?!*

I’m so frustrated that I go crying to Mr. Alkes. “Ms. Zozo, she...!” I sob, to which he says, “There there,” patting my back to comfort me, just like my father would have.

Mr. Alkes is about the same age as my father, so it seems natural to see him in that way. That said, I’m not sure whether it’s because he’s single or not, but he still feels like a young guy, despite the fact he’s in his forties. I feel a little guilty for forcing him to play the role of my father in this situation.

In the end, the only person who managed to successfully perform psychometry for the first time today was me. The Knights had followed the demon’s trail for some time before re-grouping back at the edge of the lake. From what they told us, it sounded like the demon had come from the direction of the Kingdom of Sheera, and returned in that direction after its attack on Mr. Gouda. It sounds like the Third Platoon will be visiting him tomorrow. Because the rest of the investigation will involve crossing borders, it would be taken care of at a later date, once all the necessary permissions had been secured.

The only thing left is to place an Exorcist’s Circle over the eastern portion of the forest. Rockmann takes out his golden staff, holds it firmly in both hands, then thrusts it down into the ground, releasing a magic circle.

Isn’t that rather like what my cudgel can do?

Anyhow, on the way home I’m invited to go out drinking with the Knights at

some tavern. I, very politely, turn down their invitation.

Or at least, I attempt to.

Zozo and Mr. Alkes, however, seem like they'll be joining the Knights tonight. I give the Commander a bow and a few words of farewell, but as I turn away to go home, both of them place one hand on either shoulder:

"*Nghu?*" (That's my voice there. Not even I know what I'm trying to communicate with that.)

"NO!"

"Nanalieeee, we're going *together!*"

"Who the hell wants to spend their free time getting drunk with that *pompous a—*"

It's Nikeh, of course, that strikes the finishing blow on my resolve:

"Nanalie...pleeeeeease?"

As if I could ever say "no" to you.

With a sigh, I nod my head. *To the tavern we go.*

* * * *

Right after we'd made the report on our investigation to the Director, our shift ended. We tried to invite her to come along with us for some drinking with the Knights, but we'd been met with a rather puzzling refusal: "*I can't! If I drink with **that thing**, he'll insist on paying for me!*"

"*That thing*" had clearly been referring to the Knight Commander, but why would she refuse an invitation to go out drinking on the basis that someone would pay for her drinks?

The three of us change out of our Harré uniforms and into our casual wear back at the dorms. Soon after that, we meet up with Nikeh, the Commander, and the others at the bar. The Knights are still wearing their uniforms, but it seems like they've left their pegasi back at their stables. They must have used their familiars to get here, but when Mr. Alkes, Zozo, and I get to the tavern, we don't see any evidence of them.

The bells marking the rise of the Evening Star have finished ringing, and the sun is shining from down near the horizon. Directly overhead, I can see the dim outline of the moon hiding in the early evening sky.

“Welcome!”

“Hey barman, you gonna be good with this many of us here today?”

“Course I am, half the seats are still empty, so sit where you like. I’m keepin’ out the local folk until the festival next week, so it shouldn’t get too crowded tonight.”

I can smell a mix of alcohol, spices, and perfume as soon as I walk in the door. The Knight Commander’s taken us to a neighborhood where all the businesses only open around sundown—an entertainment district.

There are, of course, plenty of businesses staffed by beautiful young ladies—but if you take a peek down one of the dark alleys, you might catch a glimpse of a strange old lady, sitting at her fortune-telling booth, or you might find some scoundrel who’s had too much to drink, asleep and lying on the ground. All of us, Knights and Harré employees alike, are walking down the streets together when all of a sudden the Commander yells for us to halt.

“This is it!” he says, stepping inside a tavern that has the words “TWO HUNDRED YEARS IN BUSINESS!” in large letters on its sign. The words are handwritten and bunched together on the board like they’re graffiti. *Well, it’s not the tidiest storefront I’ve ever seen...but inside it’s nice and homey.*

A burst of laughter comes through the open door. As I step inside, I see that the lighting is not too bright, not too dim, just right. The Knights are acting like they’re regulars here. I’ve only ever been out to the taverns near Harré with my colleagues, and we’ve never seen Knights in those places. Then again, I’ve never been to a sketchy entertainment district neighborhood like this before, so perhaps that’s why.

The tavern’s clientele is quite varied, ranging from women exposing an excessive amount of skin to men with muscles that are practically bursting through their shirts. I look left and right, fascinated to see this other part of society. Zozo pushes in through the door behind me and urges me forward.

The Commander gestures to a row of empty tables. “Hey, you two girls from Harré, take whatever spots you like. The rest of you can sit where you want too, but Mr. Alkes—you’ll be sitting next to me.”

“Alright, alright,” Mr. Alkes says, sounding slightly exasperated.

As we’re shuffling into the tavern, the Commander slaps Mr. Alkes on the back and tells him *exactly* where he’s going to sit. *They have to know each other, right?* The Commander sounds excited when he’s talking with Mr. Alkes. “It’s been a while since we last talked, you know—tell me everything.”

Is it just me, or is the Commander speaking to Mr. Alkes a little more politely than he does to his own Knights? I’m sure they have a lot to talk about—likely nothing that involves me. I move away from them to sit at the other end of the table.

“Ms. Hel, why don’t you sit way over there. I’ll be sitting here with Captain Alois, after all.”

“Sure, whatever.”

Ms. Weldy had placed her hand on the seat next to Rockmann and is now shooing me away. *She’s so direct with her antipathy, it’s almost refreshing. She really must dislike me.*

Rockmann merely shrugs as he witnesses our little interaction, as if her behavior is entirely normal—natural, even. The rest of his subordinates take the seats around him. From an outsider’s perspective, it must have been quite strange to see that dark, heavy atmosphere that clung to their table, dressed in black robes as they all were. Fortunately they had all removed their hoods upon entering the tavern—had they not, they would have looked like a group of suspicious hoodlums, despite the Order insignias.

The robes, however, seemed to be a bit much to wear at a tavern table. As soon as they claim their spots, they take them off and drape them over the backs of their seats.

“Ms. Weldy certainly has a rather *intense* personality, don’t you think? But I find I don’t mind it at all. I wonder why?”

“Why indeed?”

Even if she hadn't told me to sit halfway across the room, I would've done so anyway. "Alright, I'm *going*," I say, giving her a wave so she understands I don't intend to push her on the issue.

The reason you "don't mind it," Zozo, is because she's treating us less like we're rivals for Rockmann's affection, and more like we're little kids that need to be kept away from her precious golden child. She might as well be telling us to "go off and play" with a big happy smile on her face. You're older than her, Zozo—how can you be okay with that sort of treatment?!

Rockmann must not find her behavior too annoying to be around. Perhaps he even likes her. She's fawning all over him and I haven't seen him so much as frown once, so he probably does.

"Why don't we sit here?"

Zozo and I sit down at a table for eight a little distance away from Rockmann and his platoon. There are several extra chairs stacked up on one side of the room, so if we need more seats at our table we can always go grab some.

"Captain Alois, would you mind if we joined you?"

"Sure. Please, sit here."

"Thank you so much!"

I look back over at Rockmann's table to see that some women from the Eighth Platoon are scrambling to claim a seat next to Rockmann. Ms. Weldy is watching them, slack-jawed. *Aww. I almost feel sad for her.* The women sit in between the men already at the table. They look up at the menus posted up on the walls, chattering away about this entree or that drink.

"It's always like that when we go out drinking."

"Nikeh!"

"But I can't handle that kind of energy, so I generally stay away from all that."

Nikeh's smiling as she says that, casually taking a seat at our table.

"Can't handle that."

Sure, Nikeh certainly doesn't seem like the type who'd do well in that crowd. I

can't even picture her over there talking with them. "Anyhow, let's get to drinking! We've never had a chance to drink alcohol together, have we, Nanalie? It's nice, isn't it? Um...it's Ms. Zozo, right? Do you mind if I call you that?"

"Yes, please. You're Nikeh, right? I've heard so much about you from Nanalie. It's good to meet you."

After they've introduced themselves to each other, the three of us pore over the menus, Zozo sitting in between me and Nikeh and giving us her opinion about all the various drinks and cocktails. *You know, right now I could do with some wine or even Manas liquor.*

Someone had told us earlier that the Commander would be paying for all of us, so "there's no need to hold back!"

"But before we start drinking, we'd better eat something, otherwise all that alcohol will hit us pretty hard. Shall we start with some kind of bird dish?"

"Yeah, let's do that."

"Mind if I sit here?"

Just as I was about to turn to the wall to take a closer look at the menu, someone speaks to me from behind. It's one of the Knights of the Eighth Platoon, and he has a few others with him. He points to the seats around our table.

"Not at all," I say.

"It's alright if the rest of us sit here, right? We missed out on the other table."

Nikeh teases them as they claim their seats. "You mean, you missed out on sitting next to all the *girls* over there, righttttt?"

"Brunel, shut up."

The "girls" they're referring to must be all those ladies sitting next to Rockmann. Nikeh has a playful smile on her face as she teases them some more.

Prince Zenon's here too. He's sitting at the Commander's table, which is relatively calm compared to Rockmann's. *He's a prince, and while he may be*

only third in line for the throne, I do question the wisdom of bringing him into a place like this. But the majority of the Knights have noble backgrounds, so I suppose it isn't that big of a deal.

"I'm beat. We flew so much today that my thighs hurt."

The men, after sitting down, raise one knee and push it against the table's edge, then start massaging their upper thighs. Some of them were practically punching the muscles on their legs. *True, they must've been on their pegasi for quite some time today. I'm sure it really does hurt.*

"Nikeh, what about you? Do your legs hurt?"

"Ha! I know how to properly use healing magic, so I'm just fine." She laughs at the men punching their legs around us. "They just haven't put their minds to figuring out how to do that for themselves yet," she said, sighing. "The pegasi are sorer than you guys are!"

"Well, yeah, I bet so. Let's just go ahead and order something."

"Hey, barkeep!" One of the men calls out to the master of the tavern and orders a lot of simple dishes. After he finishes, all the men go around introducing themselves, probably so Zozo and I can get an idea who they are. They ask how old we are, complain about their jobs, get excited when they start talking about their hobbies, and we all begin chattering away, about ourselves and the world at large.

The one who asked me for permission to sit at our table is "Victor Drografia." He's told me that I can call him whatever I like, so I stick with the safe option and refer to him as "Mr. Drografia." I'm not about to go around calling someone I just met by their first name, after all. *However, in Ms. Weldy's case, all I have to go on is her first name. I suppose there's no helping that—I'm certainly not about to go asking her for her last name.*

"Huh? Look over there, at that poster on the wall."

Right as the food is being brought to our table, the guy sitting next to Nikeh points at something on the wall and everyone looks over to see what it is. It's the same poster I saw earlier at Harré: **"Seeking Ice Witches!"**

Now that I look around the room a bit more, I can see that there are several

of these posters hanging up on the walls. *For there to be this many... What could possibly be the reason that they so urgently need 'Ice Witches'?*

"The poster's from Orcinus, huh. Don't hear too many good things about them." One of the Knights sitting across from me has some meat on his fork as he comments on the poster.

"What's the deal with Orcinus?"

Zozo's too curious to let his comment go unexplained. She's still continuing to put vegetables in her mouth as she asks the question. *Ms. Zozo, please decide whether you're going to eat or talk.* Mr. Alkes gets onto her for this bad habit of hers from time to time. *Even in front of all these Knights, she persists with that behavior.* She's told me before that every time she's hungry, she's in the mood for talking, so whenever we go out to eat the conversation never ceases. I enjoy it, but Mr. Alkes seems to find it irritating.

"Well," the Knight says, with a rather conspiratorial look in his eyes, "it's said that the Queen of Orcinus is a beautiful and benevolent monarch, but that she's got a bit of a fixation on youth."

The beautiful Queen of Orcinus, with her purple hair, seems like a perfectly normal, intelligent queen from the pictures I've seen of her. Apparently, within the Kingdom of Orcinus, there isn't poverty, war, or any social unrest at all.

"The Queen of Orcinus—she's already turning fifty years old, isn't she?"

"Yeah, I think it's something like that."

Nikeh leans her face on her hands and looks at the Knight.

"Some say that she's done quite a bit to maintain her beauty," he says, "and not all of her methods have been...pleasant, I guess you could say."

Mr. Drografia has a grimace on his face as he says this. I can't help myself and ask for more details out of curiosity.

"'Quite a bit'? Like what?"

What in the world could he be talking about? "Unpleasant" methods to stay beautiful?

"There are rumors that she drinks the living blood of dragons, in addition to

hunting and eating the flesh of the mermaids in the sea.”

“Eating the flesh of mermaids?!”

“Of course, those are all just rumors, you know. Tall tales.”

While drinking dragon’s blood is bad enough, surely she’s not so lacking in common sense that she actually is eating mermaids?

In the old texts that I’d read, there were stories about how mermaids were ageless, eternally beautiful creatures, and some humans had attempted to do exactly what the Queen of Orcinus was reputed to be doing. However, some recent research had come to light that proved mermaids *weren’t* actually immortal, and as a queen, she should have been aware of that.

The research had gone on to say that while merpeople certainly are beautiful, they apparently have a lifespan of about 150 years, and do age as time passes, losing some of their beauty in the process. They are born as little babies, grow up and become pregnant with their own children, and become old mermaids and old mermen, just like humans do.

All this is to say, what’s being told to me right now is a completely baseless rumor.

“What becomes of these ‘Ice Witches’ that become her retainers? What kind of relationship do they have with the Queen, I wonder?”

“Well, you know what they say: where there’s smoke, there’s fire.”

Nikeh and Zozo both look at me.

“You’re an ‘Ice Maiden,’ right?” Mr. Drografia says. “There’s not been too many Ice mages recently, and it’s rather odd that on top of looking for Ice-Types, she specifically wants maidens. The Order has been put on alert to monitor the numbers of Ice Witches inside our Kingdom to ensure there isn’t anything suspicious going on, but nothing’s come up as of yet.”

“Ms. Hel’s probably one of those ‘Ice Witches’ that we’re keeping an eye on,” says the Knight across from me, pointing me out to the whole table.

“But earlier, didn’t you say you weren’t a maiden?” Mr. Drografia says. “That must mean you have a lover or something, right?”

“No? I’ve never had one.”

The instant I say that, every single person sitting at the table freezes.

“Oh, well, then like a one-night stand?”

“Um, Nanalie? Come here for a sec.”

Nikeh interrupts the conversation before I can reply, switches seats with Ms. Zozo and then whispers to me. “You...there’s no way...uh, Nanalie, you know the word ‘maiden,’ right?”

She puts her hand over her mouth and leans in closer to whisper quietly into my ear.

Why does she feel the need to whisper like this about it? What could it possibly be?

The very instant that thought crosses my mind, Nikeh tells me the following:

“‘Maiden’ refers to, you know, women who’ve, ah, never done *those things* with a lover. Those things that result in *getting pregnant with a baby* when done with a man.”

...I beg your pardon?

“A, a, a BABY?!”

Inside my head, I imagine some cute little babe crying at my outburst.

“No! Absolutely not! I’ve never done anything like that.”

“That right? I figured, you know. I was really surprised earlier when you said that you weren’t a maiden.”

I, who had felt a clamping chill come over me as my heart practically *stopped* at the revelation of the true meaning of the word “maiden,” now suddenly feel blood pumping all throughout my body, quite forcefully, and in my cheeks...no, across my entire face, my entire body, I feel a sudden and flaming heat race across my skin.

Even I know how babies are made. We’d verrrrrry lightly touched on the subject at school, so I’m not that clueless.

But hold on, does that mean that earlier, when I’d told everyone that I wasn’t

a maiden, I was essentially declaring, with no shame whatsoever, "I'VE HAD SEX!"?

"If there's a, ho...hole..."

"Nanalie?"

"If there's a hole, nearby, I'd very much like to hide in there right now."

I cover my face with both hands.

"You can hide right here."

"Thanks."

It's not a hole, but Nikeh holds out her arms to embrace me. I hug her close, still sitting in my seat, and bury my face into her breasts, noting (why?) that they are somewhat larger than mine.

Now would be a good time to use that time-travel spell. I'd like a do-over, please. In fact, I think I'd like a do-over of my entire life since birth.

"Maiden." I suppose that is the term to use for that sort of thing. They never taught us that at school, obviously, but surely I should have come across it in my reading or heard it from a conversation with friends?

"Ummmm," I mumble, loud enough for the Knights to hear.

"Ms. Hel?"

I sit back up and turn to face Mr. Drografia—with my hands still over my face.

"Actually...I'm still a maiden."

"What?"

Of course, it's not like I had told him directly that I wasn't earlier, but I want to make sure he isn't leaving this conversation with a gross misunderstanding, so I try to set the record straight. I peek out at his face from between my fingers. He is, understandably, confused. *Why, anyone would be, being suddenly told something like that.*

"It's just that, I didn't understand what the word meant. I'm very sorry."

I *hate* losing, but I hate lying even more. Some people apparently think that

“the honest man is a foolish man,” but he’s a good deal better than a liar, in my opinion, and furthermore that saying is just slanderous to us honest people. Any type of truism that attempts to claim that one loses something by telling the truth—it’s that kind of thinking that I hate hate *hate* more than anything else.

Not that I particularly mind if someone lies to me. Go ahead, fool me, I don’t mind. I won’t forgive you, though.

The bigger problem for me here—bigger than my embarrassment about this whole “maiden” debacle—is that earlier, I might have lied, knowingly or not.

My mother had been extremely firm about this with me as a child: “*You must never tell a lie!*” Even now, I still follow that rule, thoroughly and without exception.

Perhaps “thoroughly” sounds a bit strange, but I *do* take care not to break that rule.

A long time ago, there’d been this one time when I told my mother a lie. It had probably been about how I had or hadn’t snacked before dinner, or something like that. My mother, however, had seen through me in an instant, cast a levitation spell on me, and floated me over an open well in the backyard. It wasn’t the sight of the apparently bottomless well that scared me, per se, it was the possibility of *something unseen* waiting for me down there in the dark that was more terrifying than any demon. I hadn’t been able to use magic yet back then, so all I could do was scream, “I’m sowwy! I’m sowwy!”

I later found out that the “well” had actually run dry a long time ago. If I had fallen, there wouldn’t have been any trouble at all because there was a magical fluffy pillow waiting at the bottom.

Still, whenever I have the fleeting urge to tell a lie, that horrible experience flashes through my mind, and so I’ve been unable to tell a lie ever since.

“I must say I find it a bit strange that you’re being so straightforward about this,” Zozo says, trying to hold back her laughter at my confession of maidenhood.

Well, you’ve got a point there.

“Well, it’s no big deal; it’s all good, right?”

“Mr. Drografia?” I ask, lowering my hands so that now they only cover my cheeks.

“Actually, I’d say I’d prefer it that way.” Mr. Drografia, a Knight, is now blushing as well as he caresses my right shoulder with his hand. Both his eyebrows and eyes are drooping down a bit, and his face is flushed like he’s drunk. *But we haven’t had any alcohol yet—he can’t be drunk.*

Perhaps he’s drunk on the atmosphere of the tavern, or something.

“If you’re still a maiden, I’d be happy to be your first.”

“Excuse me?!”

“Grnnngh!”

Mr. Drografia’s head is slammed into the table.

Unless I’m imagining things, Nikeh has just kneed his head from behind. “Ohhhh myyy, Sir Victor? I am so sorry, it looks like I’m *totally drunk*.” She gives me a thumbs-up, and I let out a sigh of relief. I’m not certain *why* I’m relieved, and I ponder that feeling as I observe Mr. Drografia’s face, sunk into the table as it is.

“Hey, the alcohol’s here—let’s drink up.”

Sometime during the course of our meal, Mr. Drografia manages to sit back up straight. Apparently he’d lost consciousness because he’s asking everyone, “What were we talking about?” *I wonder if he’s all right in the head.*

“Is it really okay for us to drink this much?”

Enough drinks are being carried to our table that I’m sure they could fill a whole barrel.

“It’s fine! I’ll only drink a little, and if these blundering idiots start giving us too much trouble I’ll just stop them with a petrification curse. Nanalie, Zozo, if it comes to that, give me a hand with the spellwork, would you?”

I giggle a little. “That sounds just like something you’d think up, Nikeh!”

Nikeh and Zozo switch back to their original seats. I pick up the pitcher in

front of me and fill up both of their glasses to the brim.

The bewitchingly beautiful barmaids are climbing on top of the dining tables and beginning to dance to the music that starts to play. They flap their flowing skirts up and down, and every man in the room has their eyes locked on them as they move. The men begin to clap in time to the music, while the women look on and sing an accompaniment.

It's my first time at a tavern like this, and it's actually pretty nice here. The food is several times better than anything I can make, so... No, I can't just go out for dinner all the time; I've got to learn how to be a better cook.

"Let's give thanks to being alive! Cheers!"

"Cheers!"

Clang, ring. The room is filled with the sounds of our toast.

* * * *

Gulp! With every swallow, another little wave of heat races down my throat.

It feels good. *Another. Another.* The more I drink, the more I *want* to drink.

"This is delicious, don't you think?"

Perhaps now would be a good time to mention this: however unladylike it may be, I am quite capable of holding my liquor.

"Nanalie, are you still drinking?!"

"Oh my, our little Nanalie is quite something, don't you think?"

Nikeh looks surprised. Next to her, Zozo is bragging about me, much as a proud mother would about her own child.



“The wines certainly are tasty, but this yam liquor is rather delightful as well.”

Gulp! Another swallow.

Being able to hold my liquor, however, isn't necessarily a good thing. I have no intention of bragging about it myself. *I'm not trying to make a show of my ability to drink, here—it's just that this stuff is heavenly. I want to drink as much as I can! That's all.*

Up till now, I've just been drinking whatever Mr. Drografia recommends. He's sitting to my left. He pours, I drink, and on it goes, until the first barrel is almost gone. *Wait, are we already on the second barrel?*

“You drink them down real smooth, don't you, Ms. Hel? What about this one?” He pours into my cup again, and again, and I gulp them all down without the slightest hesitation.

Or at least, that's what *had* been going on until a few minutes ago. As he was pouring my drinks, he kept drinking his own all the while, and now it looks like he's completely wasted: his face is flushed bright red and he's collapsed onto the table. He's laid his head down onto it, turning to one side to watch me. I hold my glass up in one hand, triumphant, and then continue guzzling down the sweet, sweet ambrosia that is this liquor. *Look at him! What is he, crying? It looks like he's about to start shedding tears at any moment.*

All of the other Knights seem to have entered a sort of pleasant drunken stupor. Even under the influence, however, they remain most gentleman-like as they get garrulous with all the ladies in the tavern, putting their arms around their shoulders or laying their heads down to nap in their laps.

Perhaps all that is normal for a place like this...? The tavern owner laughs at the antics of the drunken Knights around him as he polishes glasses over at the counter. *It's more peaceful here than I imagined it to be.* The place where Zozo and I usually go is without a doubt *safer*, but I find I rather enjoy this kind of establishment as well.

“Alois, come on, drink up.”

“I'll be drinking even without you telling me to, thank you very much.”

“Drinking all prim and proper like that is just *wrong* in a place like this, you hear me? You gotta get a li'l *wild*, let your guard down a little—stop being so uptight, alright?”

The Commander had, at some point, changed seats and is now sitting next to Rockmann. *The way the Commander is drinking right now could definitely be called “wild,” that’s for sure.* Mr. Alkes and Prince Zenon are also sitting at the same table. The Commander is roughing up Rockmann a little, slapping him on the back as he encourages him to drink more. I pity him a bit as I look on. Actually, let me rephrase that—he *looks* pitiful *to me* in this moment.

The Commander seems to have temporarily managed to chase away Ms. Weldy and her incessant affections for Rockmann. Even though she’s sitting opposite Rockmann drinking, she’s turned away from him and is engaged in a lively conversation with the women nearby, who are snacking on pieces of fruit.

Rockmann looks to be finding the Commander’s insistence irritating. “I’d much rather be sitting next to a young lady than you, Commander. To put it bluntly, you’re filthy from the day’s labors and a foul-mouthed drunk to boot.”

“You watch your mouth! I’ll cast a transformation hex on you that’ll turn you into a woman if you keep going on like that. The night’s just getting started!”

Rockmann runs off to the end of the table dominated by women. “Kaldiana, Teyri—mind if I sit between you two?”

“Not at all! Please, there’s no need for you to even ask!” Two of them leap up and are now *escorting him to his seat.*

“I don’t remember teaching you to solve your problems by running away to women,” the Commander says, shaking his head.

“Didn’t you say that ‘the only things that can comfort a man are liquor and ladies’? You taught both His Highness and me that, I think. I’m not wrong, am I?”

Prince Zenon nods his head. “He’s right.”

I attempt to brush away all memory of that wretched conversation by draining my glass. *There’s nothing worse than the talk of drunken men.* I’ve never been drunk myself before, however, so perhaps I shouldn’t go around

pointing out the poor behavior of others without a little empathy. *If it can change people that easily, alcohol truly is something to be feared.*

That reminds me. There'd been this one time when I'd gone out with the Director and some of the other Harré employees, and one of the guys had gone just a *little* too far over the top: he'd teased the Director by saying, "You're a bit past your prime now, doncha think?"

Anyone can guess what happened to the employee after that.

"I didn't...mmphf—think you were...this strong..."

"Are you alright?"

Mr. Drografia is holding one hand over his mouth, cheeks bulging.

There's no way he...?

"Unnngh—!" *Barf.*

The instant I ask if he's alright, he vomits the entire content of his stomach out onto the table. All of it. The red flush on his cheeks disappears and is replaced by a sinisterly pale blue. Even without him saying so, it's quite clear that he's feeling awful.

"It's because you drank too much! Oh no, look, you got some on Nanalie!"

"Nikeh, calm down. Mr. Drografia, would you like me to take you to the lavatory?"

"Unh...*burp*. Yeah, sorry, Na-na-lee-lee."

I don't remember giving him permission to call me that, but I don't suppose that matters right now.

"Oh, it's just this...there we go!"

With just a little flick of my finger, I cleanly remove the bit of vomit that had gotten onto my blue skirt, using a bit of magic I learned in a panic after that time I stained Benjamine's clothes. It's not a particularly difficult spell, but it comes in handy from time to time.

The tavern owner seems used to this sort of thing. He casts a spell on some rags and they float over to our table and begin to wipe up the mess. As for the

vomit still on Mr. Drografia's face, I take out a white handkerchief and clean it off. His complexion, which had gotten quite pale, seems to regain a bit of its original reddish color.

"There, all good. Now then, let's get to the lavatory."

"Na-na-lee-lee!"

I, who am on my knees trying to clean up Mr. Drografia, suddenly find that he's grabbed my left hand as I hold the handkerchief in the other. He's sobbing as he tries to communicate something to me.

"I, I thought right then, that I was really done for, but...I wasn't!!"

I suppose it was too early for me to think the alcohol had worn off.

I pat his back. "You know, you really shouldn't shout like that."

I'm used to looking after drunks; I'm not going to get thrown off by someone vomiting in front of me. Having said that, I am concerned by how poorly he is feeling, so I do my best to make him feel better. Unfortunately, healing magic is ineffective on drunkenness, so the only thing to be done in a situation like this is to buy some hangover medicine from a pharmacist.

When I go out drinking, I usually bring some along with me, but tonight's outing came about so suddenly that I hadn't had time to grab any. I also hadn't predicted that we'd be drinking this much. *The greatest mistake of my life.*

"Hey, look at the number of empty glasses here! Who drank all these?" The Commander sounds a good deal closer than he was before.

The bartender answers his question. "Oh, those? It's that girl from Harré. Right, Nanalie?"

I turn around to see the Commander standing next to the table and drying off his hands with a small towel, as if he's just come back from the lavatory. It looks like Rockmann went with him, because I see him standing behind the Commander.

"That's impressive. With drinking skills like that, you really should've joined the Order."

One of the Knights lightly taps his shoulder. "Commander, please—Harré's

Director is going to get angry at you again if you talk like that.”

“If you’re able to drink that much,” the Commander says, ignoring his subordinate, “you’ll probably enjoy this other liquor even more. Wait here, I’ll have the bartender bring us out some of the good stuff.” And there he goes, walking over to the bar before I can so much as say a single word in reply.

All this happened just as I was about to take Mr. Drografia to the lavatory. Nikeh apparently heard my conversation with the Commander. She gets out of her seat and pats me on the shoulder, saying, “Let me take care of this.” Without further ado, she yanks on Mr. Drografia’s collar and drags him across the floor towards the back of the tavern.

With my charge taken out of my care, I am left at loose ends as I wait for the Commander to return. But I am not alone—Rockmann is here with me and, quite unfortunately, I happen to make eye contact with him.

Rockmann glances at the wine barrel on the table, then back at me.

“And despite all that...”

Rockmann looks at me closely. He wants to tell me something—I can see it in his eyes.

“You know,” he says, “you’re the first woman I’ve ever met that I can’t think of as ‘cute.’”

I know what he’s trying to say. But really, what’s so bad about a woman enjoying her liquor? I’m not a drunken mess right now, am I? I’ve done nothing to deserve reproach.

It’s not like I’m going to have any problems paying for my drinks. I *did* remember to grab my purse, so I have some money on me. I’ll pay for what I drank. *I seem to recall that he didn’t like it when I spoke politely to him earlier...hmmm...*

I force myself to put a big, cheesy smile on my face as I say, “Ah, why I am *honored* by your *exalted* praise of my humble self, good sir.” I drop the smile. *Too much effort.* “No one wants you to think of them as ‘cute’ anyway. I’ll just find someone else—someone who’ll manage to call even just a commoner girl like me ‘cute,’ thank you very much.”

“That’s cute.”

“You planned that!!”

Vhum! An audible *hum* arcs across my skin as I am practically *electric* with frustration at this bastard.

“Sorry for the wait. Oh, Alois, you drinkin’ too?”

“This wouldn’t happen to be the Kolassi Cocktail from Hell now, would it?”

I smooth down the gooseflesh on my arms. The Commander’s holding out a transparent glass bottle and showing it to me and Rockmann.

Rockmann seemed to know exactly what it was the moment he saw it. He’s glaring at the Commander, eyebrows furrowed.

“The Kolassi Cocktail from...Hell?”

“Well, it does have another name—‘Drink of the Dragon Killer.’”

“That sounds rather *violent*.”

“If you can still stand after we finish this, you’re a world-class drinker. Even Alois can only handle a cup and a half.”

“Rockmann can only drink that much?”

Rockmann can’t hold his liquor.

I can.

I can drink more than Rockmann.

In other words: I win.

“I’ll have some!”

I thrust out my empty cup, faster than light, pleading for the Commander to pour.

If I can down two cups of this, it’ll mean I’ve beaten that bastard.

Zozo tries to stop me. “Nanalie, are you serious?! This is the *Cocktail from Hell!*”

Rockmann holds up one hand to prevent her from getting any closer. “Ms.

Parasta, please allow her this indulgence. She's probably thinking she'll 'beat me' or something else equally stupid."

I'm not a fan of the fact that he's completely read my mind, but the Commander's already filling up my cup to the very tip-top, so I set my irritation aside to focus on the drink. It's colorless, perfectly clear, shimmering beautifully in the tavern light. *Whoever thought the "Cocktail from Hell" was a good name for this drink? It looks lovely.*

"Come now, drink up."

"Yes, sir!"

I bring the cup close to my lips. I get into attack position as I prepare to take a sip.

Two cups, that's all. If I drink two cups, a bright tomorrow awaits me—a future where I've beaten Rockmann at something.

"Nnn?"

The instant the liquor enters my mouth, my entire body is assaulted by a heat that feels as though it's going to burn me up.

"Nnnnnnnn?!"

I haven't even swallowed yet, but it feels like a giant just punched me in the head. I can feel my pulse becoming erratic, my veins gurgling with terror at this fresh shock to my system.

This—this is—

Oh, oh dear—my eyes—

Both of my elbows are down on the table as I press my face into my hands, trying to keep my eyes in their sockets.

This nausea isn't unpleasant—but my vision is starting to get blurred. Just one mouthful of that stuff, and I still haven't swallowed it—it's slightly terrifying.

So this is what it feels like to be drunk.

As I feel the first sensations of drunkenness, my heart beats a little faster in excitement at this new discovery of *feeling*. It's not like the actual sensation is

fun, per se, but to have personally discovered the novel sensation of drunkenness is a satisfying experience for an exceedingly curious person like myself.

I still have to swallow. I steel myself for the coming heat, clench my jaw, and swallow it all.

“Gu—ack, what, was that?”

“You’d forgotten that you’d already drunk two barrels’ worth, hadn’t you? And on top of that, now you’re adding the Drink of the Dragon Killer to whatever else is in your blood... There’s no way you wouldn’t be affected by it.”

“...Right.”

Right before my eyes, Rockmann takes his own cup of the Kolassi Cocktail that the Commander’s poured for him, and without further ado downs it all.

“Can’t say it’s delicious, but in all probability it *could* kill a dragon.”

What a jerk. How can he say that with a straight face, after what he just drank? Maybe after he drank a cup and a half the last time, his tongue was permanently fried, and now he can’t taste anything. There’s no way he could down it like that otherwise.

“Hey, you alright? Guess Kolassi would be enough to knock out a heavy drinker after all.”

“Nanalie? You sure you feel okay?”

The Commander and Zozo both look worried as they see the expression on my face. “Ah, I’ve done it now,” the Commander mumbles to himself, eyes drooping with worry as he massages the back of his neck. “Theodora’s gonna yell at me for sure.”

“Y-yeah. I do feel a bit, you know, nauseated. My skin’s hot.”

“I’m sure. Your face looks a lot redder than it did before. You want some water?” Zozo raises a glass of water to my lips.

“Sorry for gettin’ ya so drunk,” the Commander says. “Would y’all, uh, mind keeping this a secret from the Director?”

“The Director’s likely to be *furious* with you, Grove.”

Mr. Alkes has walked over to see what all the commotion is about. He lays one hand on the Commander’s shoulder, takes a look at my face, and laughs. “If she finds out that you’ve managed to get our heavy drinker Hel drunk, she’s likely to hate you even more than she does now!” He seems to be almost *threatening* the Commander for getting me into this state. *The Director shouldn’t be mad at him. I was the one who agreed to drink it in the first place.*

“Ah, you’re right. There’s nothing left but to call it a night. Men, we’re headed to Dollmott next! Women, be careful on your way home. Harré girls, thanks for stickin’ around. Glad I got the chance to talk to you for the first time in a while, Mr. Alkes.”

“Not at all. My pleasure.”

We’re calling it a night. The Knights stand up from their tables and carefully tidy up all the plates and utensils. No one usually does this at a tavern, of course, but they’re apparently regulars, and the owner seems to take good care of them every time, so they do it out of gratitude.

I try to help them tidy up, but Zozo stops me. “You sit right back down, young lady.” I’m uneasy watching everyone else working to carry the plates over to the bar, but they get it done quickly, so I don’t feel bad for too long.

“Night’s already over, isn’t it? Nanalie, I heard you had some of the Kolassi?”

“Nikeh...”

She’s sitting back down in the seat next to mine, having apparently finished taking care of Mr. Drografia. Her beautiful blond hair brushes against my shoulder as I lean in to give her a hug.

“What happened to Mr. Drografia?”

“Oh, he’s over there,” she says, pointing to two Knights holding up Mr. Drografia between them.

“Nikeh, thank you,” I say. “Even though, I got this, drunk.”

“It’s no big deal. You know, you’re free to go up against Captain Alois anytime you like, but take care of yourself, okay?”

“Okay.”

She looks at me, eyes full of a mother’s heartwarming affection. *I’m jealous of the person Nikeh chooses to spend her life with. She’ll be a beautiful bride, an excellent mother... I wonder if I’ll ever have children? Perhaps not.*

“Jeez, Nanalie. I wouldn’t have taken you to be the type that drinks this much. How’re you holding up?” says the Prince.

“Your Highness... I’m well, thank, you.”

“I thought that with Nikeh here, she’d stop you from going too far, but it seems like she was busy taking care of Drografia.”

Prince Zenon’s standing next to Nikeh. It would be rather presumptuous for me to call him my “friend,” but he is friendly with me. Even though he’s the same age as myself, I admit I do hold a special sort of respect for him.

Rockmann, on the other hand, shows not the slightest concern for me. He waggles his finger at us in disapproval, returns to his seat, and puts his robe back on.

“Good grief. There must be nothing in the world more tedious than a ‘men’s night out.’”

“But Captain, surely an aristocrat like yourself is merely bored being forced to socialize with us commoners, right?”

“Well, perhaps. Why don’t we just hurry up and get along home?”

The lady Knights yawn and bid the Commander and the gentleman Knights goodnight before exiting the tavern.

“Captain Alois, I’ll be looking forward to seeing you tomorrow!”

“Yeah, see you tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow, okay?”

“Yeah, bye.”

“I *will* see you tomorrow!”

“Sure, tomorrow. Take care on your way home.”

“Yes, sir!”

Ms. Weldy, of course, is the one taking so long to leave. “I *will* see you tomorrow!” she says, looking quite reluctant to leave the tavern alone, but leave she does. *Perhaps Rockmann thinks stuff like that’s cute.* I find it amusing to watch Rockmann see her off with a big forced smile on his face. *There’s a sort of desperation he has about him when he deals with commoner ladies like Ms. Weldy. It’s rather refreshing to see.*

After the lady Knights leave, Nikeh, Zozo, and I are the only women left in the tavern. Now the men are starting to leave as well.

“Oh...hold on, back at the dorm, I have, the dress.”

Just as Rockmann’s about to leave, I quickly reach out to tug his sleeve. *I’m not letting you leave so easily.* Well, perhaps I should rephrase that so I don’t sound like some perverted man trying to cop a feel on some poor woman: *I’m not going to let you leave here empty-handed.*

He twists his head to look down at me, glancing between my face and my hand on his robe. His expression makes it clear he sees me as nothing but a nuisance. “Dress?”

“The white one, I borrowed, from the Duke... I wanna give it back, so wait here.”

“No need for that. It’s yours.”

He seems to be in a great rush to leave the tavern. He pays absolutely no mind to my grip on his sleeve as he moves towards the exit, so I end up sliding across the floor like I’m on some horse-drawn sleigh. All the Knights are incredulous as they see me hanging onto Rockmann’s sleeve.

I try as hard as I can to stop him from leaving. I flex every muscle in my body to drag him back towards me.

“Unngh—!” Rockmann lets out a distinctly un-Rockmann-like grunt of displeasure as he whirls around to glare at me.

“No,” I say. “I’m giving it to you today.”

“Why?!”

“Just looking at it makes me uncomfortable.”

“Well how 'bout you feel uncomfortable for the rest of your life.”

“Don't wanna.”

I yank on his sleeve again and this time he falls to his knees. I'm staring right into his face. He doesn't seem relaxed like he normally does—he looks tired, almost sad as he meets my gaze.

“Um, I kinda want to leave, you know.”

“Captain Alois! We're going to leave you behind!”

The male Knights around us are in high spirits as they begin to leave the tavern. I hear snatches of their conversations—“all the girls at Dollmott are pretty cute, yeah?” and “the liquor's a bit iffy, though.” Rockmann's acting like he intends to join them. He waves to a couple of his subordinates after they call out for him to hurry along.

As if I'm going to let him leave—!

After all, I'm not likely to ever see him again. I'm definitely not going to seek him out myself. Now's my only chance!

“Release me, you foolish girl.”

“Not until you say you'll come to the dorm!”

I completely refuse to release my firm grip on the left sleeve of his black robe. He shoves a hand against my face, trying to break free. Neither of us back down. *Stalemate. What can I do next? Perhaps I should get out the Cudgel of the Goddess and use it on him. Might even be a good idea to use that teleportation spell it has in it to bring him back to the dorm with me. I'll be able to hand over the dress to him then and there. Then I can teleport him away, to Dollmott or wherever.*

Pretty good plan, if I do say so myself.

“Sorry for all the trouble this little one's gotten you into,” says Mr. Alkes, as if he's my father.

Rockmann grimaces. “No, it's all fine, really.” *Unconvincing.*

Mr. Alkes gently grasps my hand from behind and tries to remove it from Rockmann's sleeve. It remains quite firmly within my grasp, but for my behavior to have forced Mr. Alkes to intervene makes me feel kind of guilty, so I slowly, reluctantly, let go.

My momentum carries me backwards against Mr. Alkes, and I find myself resting my head against his chest. "No more Kolassi for you," he chides me, quietly.

I sigh. "Ooooookayyyy." I look back up at Rockmann, my lips twisted into a frown. "What's your problem, dummy? Womanizer! Player! Handsome! Brilliant! Tall!"

He shrugs. "All true, for better or worse."

Zozo crouches down next to me and pats my head.

"Ms. Parasta, is the employee dormitory near the Harré guild hall?"

"What? Oh, yes, it's directly behind it."

"There's no use fighting her any longer. I'll see her back to the dorm and then take the dress with me."

"Huh?" Mr. Alkes had been holding me back from getting to Rockmann, but now I find myself falling into his arms. *Whoa there, 1, 2, 3...* I push lightly against his chest and take three one-legged hops towards the door.

"Hey, we're leaving now," Rockmann calls out to me.

"...You're coming?"

He's apparently had a sudden change of heart. Escorting me outside the tavern, he summons his familiar. "Yuri, take us to Harré."

"Why, if it isn't Miss Nanalie! It's been a while, hasn't it?"

A black lynx is bowing its head to me. "Yuri?" I ask, a little confused by what's going on.

"Please, get on my back," the creature says, and without further ado I throw one leg over his back and sit down. His fur isn't quite as soft as Lala's, but he has that special warmth of a living creature, and that makes him feel comfortable

enough. *I'm sure if I was used to riding Yuri, his fur would feel comfy indeed.* I give his thick neck a hug.

"Commander," Rockmann calls out from behind me, "I'll be arriving a bit late."

"Alright. We'll wait for you there. Be careful."

"Kay, we're going now," Rockmann whispers to me as he gets on Yuri's back as well, sitting behind me.

"You've been kind of rude all night, you know," I mumble. He ignores me.

Yuri's back is so warm. The night winds are chilly. I feel them stealing away some of the heat I'd felt racing through my body ever since I drank that Kolassi. *The sky looks a bit closer than usual. Wait, that's because we're flying! Of course, that's why the stars seem just a little closer than normal...* I close my eyes as I feel the cool wind caress my cheeks. (We haven't actually taken off yet.)

"You really..."

"'You' this, 'you' that! It's irritating to hear you go on like that, you bald bastard."

"Even drunk you've got a bad mouth on you, don't you?"

I am not drunk.

"Also I am actually still a maiden."

"I know."

Oh, so you knew that already?

I roll my eyes. Not that he can see that. "The next time we meet, I'm gonna attack you from behind."

"Then I'll just eat you before then."

In other words, he meant to do *me* in before I could finish him off.

"I'm not delicious, so by all means have a bite."

"Can't know if you're delicious or not before I have a taste."

He wouldn't like the way I taste at all, eating all his fancy, delicious foods like he usually does. With how refined his diet is, I'm sure he'd find anything less than scrumptious completely unpalatable.

"Take care of yourself when you're hungover tomorrow," he says, wrapping his arms tightly around my waist. We take off, flying up into the stars. The last thing I remember is soaring through the night sky over the glittering lights of the Kingdom below us.

"...Huh?"

The next morning, I wake up in my own bed, covered up by my soft, fluffy sheets.

My head doesn't hurt or anything, but my memory is fuzzy due to the effects of that Liquor from Hell or whatever it was. I visit the dorm mother and ask her what time I came home. She tells me that I came in late last night with "an *extremely* handsome young man" carrying me like I was a princess all the way up to my dorm room. "He left soon after, though," she says, sounding a bit disappointed, but she gives me a wink and a smile as if she's in on the secret. Not that I have anything to hide.

I don't remember any of that. I run off to ask Zozo what happened, and she tells me that I had been very drunk and brought Rockmann back home so that I could "return a dress" or some such.

...I brought him back home?

I feel a little more awake as I head back into my room. Upon opening the door, I can see that the dress is still in there, same as always. There's a small note attached to it. On the paper reads:

"Kolassi Cocktail. You, one mouthful. Me, one and a half cups. Catch you later, loser."

"....."

I shred the note into a million pieces.

Working at Harré, Part Five

“It’s been over half a year, so how do you think it’s going?”

“How do I think *what* is going, Director?”

I’m organizing papers at my reception desk, just like I always do, when suddenly the Director comes around from behind my desk to ask me that question.

What could she be referring to?

“Well, so far I’ve been having you receive clients and go on preliminary investigations, but what do you say to trying a different type of work?”

My pen stops mid-sentence, hovering above the report I’m writing. I blink several times.

It’s been eight months since I began working at Harré. I’ve gotten the hang of psychometry and have been sent out on preliminary investigations from time to time. I’ve also managed to become a capable enough receptionist to sit at my desk all by myself. Whenever there’s an issue I’m not sure about or a difficult decision to make, I do ask for help from my senior colleagues, but there’s no doubt that I’ve become accustomed to my work here at Harré.

Still, I’m in this dangerous phase where I’m new, but getting confident in my abilities. Every night before I go to bed, I make sure to reflect on the day’s work. *I’ll keep working hard tomorrow, without getting too comfortable in my daily routine. The greatest enemy is carelessness.* Those words are constantly at the back of my mind.

The fact that I started being able to perform psychometry because of the advice that *loathsome fool* gave me is endlessly injurious to my dignity, but it is thanks to *him* that I’ve gained some of the respect I currently have from the Director. Perhaps I should even *pity* Rockmann for having given me, his enemy, one of his trade secrets. Zozo’s gotten on my case ever since that time we went on the investigation together, telling me that I should just straight-out tell him

“thank you,” but he was the one who literally shut me up with his finger when I tried to say that the first time. I have no intention of trying *that* again.

I’ve basically already said it, anyway.

There is still the matter of the dress to attend to. Setting aside my irritation about how laborious the process would be, I eventually gave in and went to the Northern Doran Sorcerous Postal Service office to fill out all the paperwork necessary to send it to the Duke’s house in a mail parcel.

I’d had to answer quite a few questions on those forms. Things like “What kind of relationship do you have with the sendee?” and “What method of delivery do you wish to use?” and so on and so forth. *This is why I don’t like using the Post to send something to an aristocrat.*

I knew from my experience with sending Maris letters that there would be some effort involved, but this time was different. Not only was the whole process troublesome as could be, I *had to* trouble myself to do this. *Ugh. I hate going to all this trouble for him. I feel like I’ve been forced to do one irritating thing after another for him, running around like he’s set my butt on fire. It’s just awful.*

And, despite having gone through *all that trouble*, of all the most impossible things, I later found out that the package was “returned to sender.” *My head hurts.* The dorm mother had tried to hand me the package on my way home one day, but I fumbled and it dropped to the floor. *That wasn’t my fault, right?*

I held myself back from exploding in frustration right then and there. I marched right back to the Northern Post Office and politely inquired as to *why*, exactly, the parcel had been returned, and all the receptionist had told me was that “the Arnold household is a special case. They do not receive packages through the Sorcerous Postal Service.”

Couldn’t you have told me that when I was filling in those forms?! Why didn’t you say anything?!

And so that is how, in spite of all my efforts to the contrary, *it* is still in my room. I dislike leaving things hanging about, so the other day I had taken it down and put it in my drawers. I took out my top drawer, emptied it of all my coarse, commoner clothes, and tossed it in there. Well, actually, I gently placed

it in there, but I'd felt like tossing it, that's for sure.

"Different work, you say?"

"Want to try doing reception over in the Soreiyu Territory?"

"That's...to the south, right?"

"It's a good opportunity for you to try working in a different place, too. The types of requests that come in over there are not like what we get here at headquarters. Plus, I'll be having you go over there from time to time to help in the future, so you might as well get used to the place now, right? Harris and Zozo sometimes go help them, and most of the workers are girls who live in the same dormitory as you, so I think you'll be seeing quite a few familiar faces."

The Soreiyu Territory. Harré's Sorcerers' Guild is in the north, but there are also smaller guild offices around the Kingdom. I think of them as "branch offices."

The headquarters are, of course, here in the north where I'm based now, but for clients and sorcerers living in the south and other faraway parts of the Kingdom, getting here can be kind of tough, so there are three other small guild offices placed throughout the Kingdom. Connecting them all is a magic door called the "Go-Between."

The door is on the rear side of this building, and Harré employees that are based in the branch offices arrive here at headquarters every day to open that door and set off to their workplaces. Whenever something happens at one of the other offices, they can use those doors to instantly communicate with headquarters and get in touch with the Director. Basically, there is never a single part of Harré that doesn't have access to the Director. All any employee from anywhere in the Kingdom has to do is use the Go-Between to find her. The Director does, however, go on vacation from time to time, so there's no helping that, but when she's gone, Mr. Alkes is usually around, so our quasi-Assistant Director can take care of the issue.

One time I'd been working when all of a sudden an employee burst out the Go-Between crying for help against the demons that were attacking the southern guild office.

“Ca-ca-ca-calm down, please!”

The first thing I’d done was offer them water.

They’d been short-staffed when the attack had occurred, and the demons had been ridiculously large, supposedly. Four of them appeared at the office’s front door without so much as a whisper of warning before beginning their assault. They couldn’t fight them off with so few employees at the office, and the demons had already broken through the anti-demon magic circle that was their first line of defense. The Director immediately set out to recast the circle around the southern office, but there’s no telling when the demons might attack it again.

The southern office seemed to get a lot of requests for exorcisms. We end up posting a lot of the requests up here at headquarters as well, mostly because there aren’t many sorcerers who live in the Soreiyu Territory, and the ones we have up here tend to be a bit more ambitious, perfect for demon-killing.

“After you’ve spent a month there, we’ll put you at a reception desk for sorcerers, even though it’s a bit early.”

“Really?!”

I’m in the middle of work but here I am, shouting. A few sorcerers glance over in our direction. I lower my gaze to the floor out of embarrassment. Even so, I can barely contain my happiness.

Not only am I going to get the chance to learn about a new guild office, I’m one step closer to the day I’ll achieve my dream of sitting in the same seat that receptionist lady had! Just getting a job here at Harré has been wonderful, but to finally become like that receptionist lady I saw as a child all those years ago...! I feel like I’m about to start crying tears of joy, even though I haven’t achieved that dream quite yet.

“Because there are a lot of requests for exorcisms, you’ll need to take extra care on your preliminary investigations, okay?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“It’s been a real relief that you’ve learned how to use psychometry! The only ones who can use it besides myself are Alkes, Orkal, Palma, and Yakkurin, so we

really needed another person.”

“I’m just glad that I can be of help, Director.”

I enjoy helping everyone in my role as a Harré employee.

“Okay then, I’ll have you working there starting tomorrow.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

I get back to work, excited for the adventure awaiting me tomorrow.

* * * *

“Um, I’d like to file a request...”

“Good afternoon. Please, take a seat.”

I come back from my break to relieve the other receptionist who covered for me. Just as I sit down, I hear a client come over to my desk to make a request.

The client’s a thin man who looks to be in his thirties. I can’t say he looks very handsome, as his clothes have large stains all over them. But it’s not like he himself looks dirty—he doesn’t smell bad or anything. I think I can even smell some hair gel on him.

After I encourage him to sit down, he plops down into the chair in front of my desk and lets out a sigh.

“My dreams lately have been awful. I keep having nightmares.”

“Nightmares, you say?”

I can see dark circles under his eyes. *Perhaps he’s younger than I thought...?*

The man’s name is Yahman Krak. He tells me he’s 25 years old. *That’s more than five years younger than what I’d guessed.* I’m surprised by the difference, but also convinced he’s telling the truth. *His face doesn’t look like he’s aged that much—it’s more like I can see the tiredness on his face, and the air of exhaustion he carries around with him.* His eyes are only half open, and he’s directing his gaze down at my neck instead of my face.

“It’s not just nightmares,” he says. “Every time I wake up, my room looks like it’s been ransacked. I thought it was robbers at first, but nothing was stolen, so maybe it’s just a couple of pranksters? But then I got to thinking it might be

pestrokraive. I'm not sure. It doesn't look like something pestrokraive would do. All the papers and books in the room are torn up every time, like someone came in and ripped the place apart."

Just hearing about it creeps me out.

I haven't even experienced it for myself and it still creeps me out. I feel so bad for this guy.

"Does your body feel heavy after waking up?"

"...To tell you the truth, I feel beyond tired, all the time. I find myself staring off into the distance a lot. I went to the pharmacist and got some medicine, but it doesn't work. Healing spells don't work either."

Horrible dreams, and his room is a complete mess every time he wakes up.

He goes on to tell me that the only thing he can remember from his nightmares is being chased by something black. He's tried writing down more about what he remembers, but when he wakes up, his room's a mess, and by the time he's found a pen and paper he can't recall what he saw. He's come to Harré out of desperation because he's tried everything else and is still haunted by these nightmares.

Well, of course he's feeling desperate. Who wouldn't be after finding their room mysteriously messy every time they wake up? No matter how many times it happens, I'd never be able to get used to that.

There are many types of healing spells, and when medicine doesn't work on a certain ailment, a spell usually will, and if a spell doesn't work then a medicine usually will. People usually manage by using one or the other. *For fatigue, which isn't even a flesh wound, there are several spells and medicines that can be prescribed, but for none of them to work on him? Odd indeed. What's the real issue here?*

"Hel, why doncha try just using some psychometry on him?"

"Mr. Alkes," I say, turning around to look at him. He's been organizing papers behind me for a while. He points at the client and twirls his finger a bit.

"Maybe it's the Dream Demon."

“Demon?!” The man shouts, surprised, freezing in fear before I can say anything.

A Dream Demon? I don't know what Mr. Alkes is talking about. He can see the confusion on my face. Pointing to his own forehead, he frowns in concentration, closing his eyes as if to think.

“There was a similar case, long time ago. Involved a demon that got into people's dreams.”

“Dreams...”

“It would cause the dreamer to have nightmares, then wear out their body and mind by causing them to walk in their sleep. And then, in the end...it would eat them.”

“E-e-e-EAT them?!” The man is understandably shocked by this revelation and has jumped out of his seat.

If this is a type of demon that's been dealt with before, there should be a record of it in the office archives. With a name like the “Dream Demon,” that information should be easy enough to find. There might also be notes on what methods were used to get rid of it.

“Mr. Krak,” I say, “would you mind if we verify the events of last night?”

“N-no! Not at all! I haven't done anything to be ashamed of.”

With his consent, I do as Mr. Alkes suggested, pointing my finger in the man's direction and beginning to twirl it. *Psychometry's all I've got in a situation like this. It'd be preferable to do this in an area away from other people, but he looks positively terrified at what I'm about to do, so perhaps being around other people will make him feel a bit more relaxed.*

As I twirl my fingers, images of what Mr. Krak did last night fill the air. I see him eating dinner before bed. Then I see him sleeping. He looks as though he's somehow in pain, struggling and stretching out his hands like he's trying to run away from something.

But then he gets up, still asleep. His eyes are glowing red as he begins stumbling around the room. He knocks over everything he touches, tearing

apart every book and item of clothing he can get his hands on. All the while, an inhuman growl comes out of his mouth: “*Garr! Gurr...*” It’s the sound of a savage beast—or close to it, but it makes all my hair stand up on end.

Maybe he really is being possessed by this “Dream Demon,” just like Mr. Alkes said.

Mr. Krak is staring at the images with his mouth hanging open and eyes wide in shock. *He probably can’t believe what he’s seeing. Heck, if I found out that I was turning into something like that night after night and destroying my dorm room, my eyes wouldn’t be open wide—I’d be fainting from the shock.*

Regardless of how disturbing the images are, we now have an explanation for the mess: Mr. Krak himself is the one destroying his room every night. The only issue left to address is...

“Only thing to do is rip it out with a rite of exorcism. It’s gotta be done by a skilled sorcerer, an Air-Type.” Mr. Alkes has been next to me the whole time, watching the memories. It’s him who suggests the solution.

“Air-Type?”

“These demons fly around through the air, riding the wind. A mage that can control the flow of the air will be able to get rid of it easy.” He pauses for a moment, frowning a bit. “We still don’t quite know if this really is the same type of demon as the Dream Demon, however.”

Be that as it may, we do know that we’re dealing with a demon. There’s only one thing to do.

“Now then, Mr. Krak, due to the fact that your request involves a demon that is endangering your life, we will be posting this up on the notice board *immediately*, alright?”

“Am I...going to be okay?”

“No matter what it takes, we will find you someone who can rescue you from these nightmares. If you’re concerned about going home, however, why don’t you spend the day here at the Guild?”

“Would you mind?”

“We won’t force you to stay if you’d rather be at home, but there’s food you can buy here, and we’re open all night. I just thought that once we identify a sorcerer that can help you, it’d be quicker to have you nearby so that we can resolve the issue as soon as possible...”

“Oh, of course! I was scared thinking about going home by myself, so I’d much prefer to stay if you’ll let me do that instead!”

Mr. Krak nods vigorously in relief as he listens to my suggestion. I roll up the white sleeves on my uniform and immediately get to work on writing up his request form. After I’ve finished filling it out, I have him go rest in a chair in the corner. I’ve warned him not to fall asleep, but considering how exhausted he looks, I’m worried he’s going to pass out anyway.

“There have been more demons around lately, haven’t there?” I ask Mr. Alkes.

“Well yeah, it comes and goes. For some reason we get a lot of requests for exorcisms in the spring, when the flowers start blooming... I’m gonna go take a look into the archives. Anything comes up while I’m gone, ask Zozo or Harris for help.”

“Thanks for your help, sir.”

I bow my head in gratitude. *Maybe tomorrow I should go take a look in the archives myself? Find out a bit more about these demons, and how past sorcerers dealt with these kinds of requests.* I’ve been going there more often recently, studying how requests for different sorts of problems are written. *There are so many books in there, you’d think it was the local bookstore.* I do my research in there, obviously, but sometimes I also pop in to read a chapter or two of whatever interesting novel I happen to come across.

Only moments after posting the request on the notice board, a sorcerer appears to accept Mr. Krak’s request, and the two of them leave Harré together. Mr. Krak, probably relieved at the prospect of a good night’s sleep, is in tears as he expresses his gratitude to the sorcerer over and over on their way out, saying “Thank you sir, thank you sir!” He’s so insistent with his thanks that the sorcerer is practically bending over backwards to avoid getting whacked by Mr. Krak’s repeated bows.

The only thing left for me to do now is pray. Please, Goddess, please let that man find peace.

* * * *

“With all these flowers blooming, people’ll be sending bouquets to each other soon enough, won’t they?”

After work is over, Zozo and I head over to the Vegetarian Wolf for dinner, just like we always do. Anytime she says she wants to “nom on some meat,” we always end up at this restaurant. Zozo dines out so often it’s practically her defining characteristic. She tells me that she absolutely *refuses* to cook for herself, and while I do find that to be a bit of a worrisome philosophy for an adult to commit to, she looks so happy when we’re out eating and she’s stuffing her mouth full of meat that I can’t seem to make myself reprimand her. It helps, of course, that this place serves bunny-bird skewers, so I happily accept whenever she invites me to come along.

When it comes down to it, perhaps I am just as much a fan of dining out as Zozo. “I bet every lovestruck maiden is giddy with excitement right about now,” she says as she twirls her fork in the air, the thick chunk of meat glistening in the light of the restaurant’s lanterns.

I suppose I should explain what she’s talking about: right now, Doran is in the “Season of Flowers.” The “Season of Flowers” is also called the “Season of Love.” Doran has three seasons in total. When the winds are warm and flowers are blooming throughout the Kingdom, it’s the “Season of Flowers.” When the winds blow cold and the snow falls, it’s the “Season of Distant Skies.” Finally, during those long, easy days when a refreshing breeze blows throughout the lands, we have the “Season of Light.”

The longest of the three seasons is the Season of Light, which lasts about half the year. This year’s Season of Light, however, ended a month ago, and now flowers color the landscapes throughout the Kingdom. If you walk through town, you’re likely to see petals dancing in the wind as they fall from the trees, while at the edges of the streets you can see many bright flowers planted here and there, completely changing the scenery with their colors.

“Who will *you* be giving a bouquet of flowers to, Ms. Zozo?”

“Me? I won’t give them to anyone. Doesn’t look like I’ll have much luck with love this season after all,” she says, her expression quite dark as she shows me a page in one of her popular magazines. She always carries them around with her, so I’m not surprised she has one on hand. By now I know that whether she’s at home, on a walk outside, or even at work, she has at least one of those things hidden on her somewhere.

I roll my eyes and take a closer look at the article she’s pointed out. “Alright, where does it say *that*?” On the page is written:

“For those Earth-Type women born during the second month of Flower Season, it’s best if you refrain from interacting with men this month as much as possible: Give flowers to none and you shall not become undone. Only a fool would break this rule; else horrible disaster you shall ever abide, or worse, no man shall ever take you for his bride.”

“Well,” I say, blinking my eyes quite rapidly, “when you’re given a warning like that, you can’t exactly ignore it, can you?” *Her fortune is exactly as bad as she said. How unbelievably rude of the author to write it straight-out like that! If I were to show this to the Director and this was her fortune, why, the very next day this “fortune teller” would get her face punched inside-out!*

“Lady Merakisso’s fortunes are the real deal,” Zozo says, “I don’t think any Earth-type witch born in the second month of Flower Season will be giving *anyone* flowers this year. Sad, really.” She has an incongruous gloating smile on her face, as if the fortune somehow doesn’t apply to her. “As if you’d be allowed to do something happy like give flowers to someone,” she mumbles to herself.

The look in her eyes frightens me.

Or rather, the fact that Lady Merakisso’s fortunes could make Zozo act so out-of-sorts is scary. *But if they make her feel this strongly, perhaps those fortunes aren’t all baseless superstition. They must be right at least some of the time.* “Fortune telling,” I should mention, is not a formal branch of magic, and personally I don’t have much faith or interest in the sayings of fortune tellers.

“Flower gifting” is, by the way, one of the main customs associated with the Flower Season Festival. On the first day of the second month of Flower Season,

the King and the Queen Consort fly down from the Royal Isle. They go around the towns in a wonderfully extravagant horse-drawn carriage, sprinkling petals from Isle flowers onto the streets as they pray for continued peace in the Kingdom.

Flower gifting, however, is only indirectly related to what the royals do at this time of year. The custom of lovers or engaged couples exchanging flowers on the day that the King and the Queen Consort come down from out of the sky became known as the “Rite of the Giving of the Flowers” long ago, over the course of many years.

In ancient times, the King and the Queen Consort were said to be god-like beings. In modern times, we obviously don’t go around treating them as our deities, but they do still retain some of that image in the common perception, especially in our marriage ceremonies. Whenever two people are married in Doran, they swear a vow to the Kingdom’s founding deity, Pramána. As the founding deity, Pramána is kind of an ancestor of Prince Zenon, according to the stories.

So that’s why it’s so special to confess your love for someone on the day that the royal family flies down from the Isle. It’s not clear why, exactly, confessing your love for someone is something that should be accompanied by giving them flowers, but I guess someone just happened to do so at first, and it became more and more popular until it’s gotten to the point where everyone does it now.

“Wow, are they still doing this?”

“SEEKING ICE WITCHES! THE QUEEN’S NEXT MAID IS YOU!... Is that so? The more catchy they try to make it sound, the lamer it gets.”

Underneath the article on fortunes, there’s an advertisement that looks similar to the one that I saw on Harré’s notice board. That one had ended up being taken down, though, so it’s not there anymore. I don’t know if there were any applicants for *that* particular job, but based on the advertisement I’m reading in the magazine, it doesn’t look like they managed to attract many potential “maids.” *They must be pretty desperate to take out an ad in these sorts of magazines.*

“When were you born, Nanalie?”

“I was born in the first month of Distant Skies.”

“Distant Skies, first month, Ice Witch...ah, here we are.”

Zozo runs one finger down the columns to look for the fortunes for those born during the Season of Distant Skies. “‘Work will go well for you this month. You’ll likely be able to save up some money,’ is what it says.”

“Sweet!”

I’m a simple person. Even if I don’t believe what’s being said to me, I’m still happy to hear it’s all good stuff.

“As for your fortunes in love this month, however...”

“I don’t need to hear that. Don’t care.”

“Well I care, so let me read it.”

Of course, I’m not one to criticize other people for taking an interest in other people’s love lives, so I shrug and listen to what she reads.

“Here it is: ‘A brush with the blazes of passion shall melt you to your core. In the second month of the Season of Flowers, beware Fire-Types. Fortune shall be with those who avoid them. A Lightning-Type man shall bring you good luck.’ That’s your fortune!”

Zozo sounds incredibly amused as she reads this out to me, watching my reaction with a big smile on her face.

I frown a bit. “There are plenty of Fire-Types in my life, so it’ll be a bit difficult for me to ‘avoid them.’”

“But then it says that ‘a Lightning-Type man shall bring you good luck,’ so why don’t you give flowers to a Lightning-Type?”

“As if there’s any likelihood of me doing something like *that*!”

Dinner was incredibly delicious. I ate so much that I almost couldn’t finish dessert, but in the end, I confess that I made short work of the sweet cocotte bird eggs. Unfertilized cocotte eggs are sweet all by themselves, and are used

quite often when making sweets, a rare natural food that requires absolutely no seasoning. In contrast, the salty eggs of the gogotte bird aren't suited for making sweets with, but are commonly used in recipes for savory dishes.

Both types of eggs, however, are a bit expensive. For someone on a budget like myself, I almost never got the chance to eat them. *Not that I should be complaining about the prices of food on a night when I went out to eat, though.*

"Goodnight, Ms. Zozo."

We're now back at the dorm, saying goodnight to each other in the hallway in front of our doors. The dorm has three levels, and both Zozo and I have rooms on the top floor. Ms. Harris also lives on this floor, so I see her often even outside of work.

Harré's interior is mostly wood, but the outer walls and roof are made with bricks. The dorm building is built in much the same way. That's why all the employees who don't live in the dorms, or rather, those who *dislike* living in the dorms, say that living here is like "being at work even after work."

I won't deny there's some truth to that idea, but once I'm inside my own room, I don't feel that way in the slightest. I find my room quite comfortable, and I think many others feel the same way—after all, we aren't obligated to live here, but even so, the majority of single Harré employees choose to do so anyway. Most of the married employees, however, commute to work from their houses. For those who aren't married but *do* have a lover of some sort, they usually move out of the dorms and rent out a room from a lodge nearby, since we aren't allowed to have visitors in our rooms.

There aren't many people of the latter sort, however, and just the other day I chanced upon one of my senior female colleagues sneaking her lover into her room. There's nothing like an "anti-man charm" placed around our dorm, so it's quite easy for them to get inside. Still, I can't imagine why they want to spend their time inside the dorm when that means they have to avoid the attention of the dorm mother the whole time. I can't imagine they'd find it relaxing in here.

Zozo and I had caught the two lovebirds sneaking around together. When I'd spoken to her later about it, she'd said, *"There's kind of a thrill to getting caught, don't you think?"* and then bit down on her thumb as she wagged her

eyebrows at me.

“Night!” Zozo says, then stops. “Oh, hold on—Nanalie, I’ve got something for you.”

Right when we’d been about to go our separate ways for the evening, she hurries into her room to grab something and then thrusts it into my arms. She does it so quickly that I fall over.

I take a look at what she pushed into my arms. It’s one of those monthly magazines she’s always carrying around. The same one she showed me while we were eating. I look up at her, incredulous. “For me?”

What’s gotten into her? Why would she give one of her precious magazines to someone like me who doesn’t even read them? I feel the pages of the magazine. *Hold on, this feels brand new—newer than the one she showed me at the Vegetarian Wolf, anyway. There’s not a single crease or crinkle anywhere on the paper.*

“I always buy four copies,” she says, “one to display, one to read, one to put into storage, and another to give to someone else.”

As she sees me hesitating to accept her gift, she laughs and pulls out another copy from inside her jacket. *That’s the first I’ve heard of this “four copy” system.*

“What’s the point of having a copy for storage if you also have one for display?” I say, teasing her a little.

She’s quite serious when she yells back at me. “What foolish nonsense!” Apparently there is a *very big reason* for having both a storage and a display copy. She goes on to tell me the magazine covers on her display copies are practically small pieces of furniture in the way that they decorate her room, while the storage copies are useful for this, that, and some other purpose that she goes on to elaborate about over several minutes.

Well, I may not understand much about her penchant for this magazine, but there’s no doubting the fact that she is a valuable customer for its publishers.

But if this is the “copy to give to someone else,” why me? I look down at it again.

“After talking again with you today, I knew I was right.”

“Excuse me?”

She places one hand on her hip, thrusts out her other hand and points right at me as she says, very clearly:

“You need to try broadening your perspective on life.”

I’m a bit at a loss for words at that.

“Nanalie, you’re always going on about this, that, and the other when it comes to work stuff, but you never show any interest in anything else!”

“I like my job.”

“At it again are we, Zozo?”

“Ms. Harris.”

From two doors down, I can see Ms. Harris opening her door and sticking her head out into the hallway. Her glasses are resting on top of her head and it looks like she’s just gotten out of the bath, because her hair’s wet and her cheeks look a little flushed. She squints down the hallway at us. *Without her glasses, I doubt she can see much at all.* “I heard voices from all the way inside my bathroom. I got a little worried so I came out to check,” she says, adjusting her glasses to rest neatly on the bridge of her nose.

“Zozo’s given me several copies of that magazine over the years,” she continues. “We tend to cluck our tongues and *tsk tsk* those couples who go around kissing each other in public, so perhaps you think it’s a bit strange for single ladies like us to recommend these types of magazines.”

Zozo nods vigorously. “It’s just that, if we can’t manage to get men falling all over us, we at least want you to find someone to love!”

“Alright, alright, I get it!”

Ms. Harris steps out into the hallway. The only thing she’s “wearing” is a bath towel wrapped around her body. I imagine it would be positively traumatizing for her if a man were to suddenly appear and take a look. I’m used to living in all-girls dorms, so I don’t find it to be an unusual thing to do, but still, for some reason my heart pounds to see her like this out in the hallway. If Nikeh or Maris

were here, I'm sure they'd tell her something like, *"You're a girl! Have a little self-respect and stop walking around naked!"*

"Both of you will be heading to the Soreiyu District tomorrow, right?"

"Yes, we will. Once she's spent a month working over there, our little Nanalie will be a fully-fledged receptionist."

"I'll do my best!" I ball up my fists in anticipation, ready to take on whatever I may encounter tomorrow.

"Hmmm, perhaps if you showed this sort of enthusiasm in matters outside of work..." Ms. Harris is about to give me another earful. I say a quick "goodnight!" to the both of them and then run into my room, shutting the door behind me with a satisfying *click*. Faintly, I can hear them still talking in the hallway. "It's *you* I'm worried about, Zozo," Ms. Harris would say, only for Zozo to reply with "No no, it's *you* who we should be worrying about," and so on and so forth they go on talking.

I sigh, walk away from the door, and roll into bed. I realize that I still have the magazine in my hands. *I'm not about to go back out there and return it, so I guess I'll leave it here for now...* I place it on top of my desk. The magazine stands out *quite* a bit in my room, filled as it is with reference books, dictionaries, and maps.

Oh, that's right—the dorm mother gave me a letter from Maris earlier today. I pull out a red envelope from my desk drawer.

"Maris has such nice stationery," I say, happily humming a little tune to myself as I pull out the letter.

Dear Nanalie,

Are you doing well?

I suppose you're tired of being asked that. I'm sure you're doing quite well...or I would be if you answered my letters more often! I send you a letter every week, but there you are, sending me only one letter every two weeks! What's the meaning of this?! Are you trying to make me out to be some sort of clingy, overbearing correspondent?! One reply for two letters! One!! ...My goodness, dear, there's a limit to how indolent a person can be, you know. I've been

sending Sir Alois one letter every three days, and he still manages to find time to reply to each one. He's not often at his mansions, so I've been addressing them to the castle. Really, follow his example and just write back to me, would you? Anyway, I'm sure you're aware that flower giving is going to start soon, yes? But you being you, without the slightest notion of Love on your mind, will probably be sending your harmless little bouquets to your parents and friends. Why, it's because you and Nikeh show no interest in Love that my life's become so boring, you know. P.S.: On the first day of the second month of Flower Season, I'll be going up to the Royal Isle, and I'm sure you'll have the day off as well—if you're able, let's have a little chat, shall we? Face-to-face.

Yours,

Maris Hestia Lovegol Caromines.

I roll back onto my bed, still staring at the letter.

There are several lines that I have *feelings* about, to say the least, but first of all let me say that I *am* aware that I've been rather lazy in writing my replies to her. The best time of day for doing that sort of thing is right before breakfast, but for some reason I find writing letters to friends to be rather difficult. Perhaps I'm just the type of person who prefers to talk face-to-face. I've been working hard at writing out my replies to her, trying to find the right words to say, but in the end I suppose I'm just bad at writing back to people. *This time, I'll work harder to try and reply before she sends the next one.*

I do feel a little of that competitive spirit taking over now that I know that Rockmann manages to respond to her letters once every three days, while I've been barely getting by on once every two weeks. It's *immensely* vexing for him to be able to do something that I can't.

But what in the world do they talk about in their letters, writing every three days like they do? Aristocrats sure are different from us common folk.

"A red envelope..." I mutter to myself, looking down at the envelope Maris had put her letter into. *Red. Maris is a Fire-Type witch, isn't she? Who else... Oh right, Benjamine is a Fire-Type too.* Now that I think about it, both of them are rather intense in their romantic affections. While neither of them are exactly "melting" out of love for anyone, their lives are definitely ruled by those "blazes

of passion” that had been in my fortune.

Rockmann is also a Fire-type, but the fire he carries around doesn’t inspire *passion* so much as it *inflames* one with irritation with his holier-than-thou attitude. *That womanizer behavior of his is going to get him stabbed someday.*

“A brush with the blazes of passion shall melt you to your core.”

“...No way,” I say, shaking my head. Fire’s a common magic type. I can’t let myself get carried away worrying about that fortune. Besides, what did the whole “melting” thing mean? Would I physically melt away to nothing? I slip Maris’s letter back inside the envelope. Now for a bath, and then to bed.

The next morning, I do as the Director instructed and wait in front of Harré’s back door.

“There’s not many people working in the Soreiyu District. I hear they’ve got it rough.”

“Is Harré short-handed, then?”

Zozo’s going to be coming with me, so right now we’re waiting in line in front of the back doors and discussing our plans for the day. It’s early morning, and while it may be the “Season of Flowers,” I’m feeling a little chilly. It’s colder outside than I had expected earlier this morning.

But with the brightening rays of the sun comes warmth that brings out the verdant aroma of the new greenery and the perfume of the blooming flowers along the streets. Around the Guild, the pleasant scent of the kurette flowers is particularly strong, and I can’t help but feel happy as I smell it. It’s a scent that is somehow nostalgic, a scent that I feel I encountered once long ago, and it puts my mind at ease as I stand here, waiting to start a new day and a new adventure.

“Short-handed? Well...yeah, I guess you could say that.” Zozo nods, and leans her chin on one hand in thought. “The only newbie this year was you, and considering the fact that we only accept applicants with stellar grades, it’s not too surprising that we find ourselves without enough employees to go around.”

“Why doesn’t Harré try using an entrance exam system to find new

employees? I'm sure there'd be plenty of applicants."

"A lot of the others have been talking about something like that, you know. Mr. Alkes, as a mid-career hire, joined Harré by passing a test the Director put him through... Then, of course, we occasionally get the odd stranger who feels the need to disparage us by saying that 'anyone could do our jobs.' Of course, that kind of person is usually just bitter about other aspects of their life. Most of the time it's some sorcerer who's out of work and down on his luck, drinking away his days at the guild canteen."

My eyebrows jump in surprise at this information. "You'll get wrinkles if you keep doing that," she says, laughing a little bit as she smooths away the crease on my forehead. "Our profession, you know, isn't the flashiest, but we do put our lives on the line when we go out on investigations. Our work isn't quite as important as that of the sorcerers and the Knights, but the reason our job exists is to protect the lives of the sorcerers and their clients. That's why there *are* receptionists who have died in the past while out on preliminary investigations, and that's why there *need* to be people like us around to ensure that the requests being made by the clients are being accepted by sorcerers who can do them without losing their lives in the process. No matter how someone might try to insult us and the work we do, that will never change. I do, of course, still respect the sorcerers and how they help people, even if some of them can be a bit rude from time to time."

"They know that, I think. After all, every receptionist has a smile on their face when they're on the job, no matter what attitude the sorcerer has."

"Haha, caught on to it, have you? Ours can be a bit of a thankless profession," she says with a wink.

Before I'd gotten my job at Harré, all I had known was how it looked from the outside. I hadn't known why future employees of Harré had to study so hard, nor why they had to be such good mages. When I'd told my friends that I'd be working here, they'd seemed confused, asking me why I'd want to work in "a place like that."

Now I know that most people think of Harré as "a place like that."

"But you know we often meet Knights when we're out in the field, so they do

understand and respect our work, just as we appreciate what they do. It's because of that sort of relationship that people like Alkes change jobs, leave the Order, and join Harré, so it's a give-and-take, really."

Harré employees often work together with Knights from the Order, so both groups understand that neither of them "has it easy" on the job, or so she tells me.

"I'm not saying that's the whole reason why, or anything, but there are several girls who have a knightly lover in the Order, you know."

"Is—is that so?"

"Dalia, you remember, she snuck that guy in the other day, right?"

"That was a Knight?"

"And to think, she met him while on the job! You don't go out into the field just to find love, you know—you're supposed to work! But if you follow that line of thinking too much, you'll end up like the Director, who is still sing—ouch!"

A hand as pale and slender as a whitefish slams down on Zozo's head.

"Sing-what?"

Wearing a Harré uniform that's neither white, nor black, but *blue* and extends all the way to her ankles, is the Director. She has on a large round hat the same color as her uniform. Her expression appears to be caught between amusement and irritation—upon looking closer, I can see the edges of her mouth twitching down to frown, so I guess she isn't smiling. Her height is, at this distance, intimidating to both of us.

She has both hands on her hips. Her sleeves, which are rolled up to her elbows, are unusually long, and are billowing gently in the wind to create the illusion of some larger than life figure standing right next to us.

"Sing...singularly sexy," Zozo stutters, "You're a woman who carries a singularly sexy aura with you wherever you go."

"Thanks."

The Director seems satisfied with Zozo's "explanation." She gives her a nod, then gets down to business. "Zozo, I'll be needing you to take care of Nanalie,

okay? Guide her around in the manner I've written down on this paper. Also, it's a little warmer down there than it is up here in the north, so be sure to show her how to modify her uniform."

"Yes ma'am."

"Excellent. Nanalie, Zozo—good luck." After the Director finishes making her request to Zozo, she gently pats my head in farewell.

"Yes ma'am!" is how I'd *intended* to reply, but upon seeing the smile on the Director's face, I freeze up.

"What's the matter?"

"Nanalie?"

With one hand still on the top of my head, the Director looks at me carefully, eyes wide as she tries to figure out what's wrong with me.

Zozo's looking at me as well, head tilted to one side.

"Good luck."

"Welcome back. You've done well!"

From somewhere beside me, I hear the voice of a certain woman. *It can't be...can it?*

My eyes remain on the Director. I blink once, twice, three times.

—I know this feeling. It's what I felt all the way back then, when I first came to Harré and experienced something like love at first sight upon meeting my first love.

I'd been totally unable to move. All that I'd been able to see was the smile of *that person*.

That smile had seemed brighter than the sun, the moon, and all the stars in the sky put together.

I don't know how old she was.

All I know is that the image of her at that moment remains etched quite vividly into my memory. Long, straight brown hair. Brown that had a little bit of red mixed into it. Eyes as calm and colorful as the sunset. The warm, perfectly

curved smile she gave me every time I walked in the door.

She was always sitting there, greeting everyone with a smile. That lovely, lovely receptionist lady.

Why hadn't I noticed it earlier?

I've seen her so many times that it's strange that I'd only realize this on a day like today.

Of course, I might be mistaken.

But I don't think I am. My memory's always been my greatest strength.

The person who'd changed my life so greatly, after all this time, I knew she was—

"Director, you really *are* a good woman, you know."

"What are you going on about, silly? Get going, and take care!"

Quite unexpectedly, today was the day I finally discovered who it was I'd been aspiring to become, after all this time.

I hold back the flood of emotions I feel as my heart pounds with excitement. The Go-Between door is opened, and without hesitation, I step into that glowing, shimmering light.

In the southern part of the Kingdom that makes up the Soreiyu District, there's a small branch office of Harré's Guild for Sorcerers. According to what the senior receptionists have told me, the weather down here is a little warmer than it is up at headquarters in the north. Even within the same Kingdom, we experience some variation in climate. It's too hot down here to wear our long-sleeved uniforms during the Season of Flowers, let alone the Season of Light. But that doesn't mean it's so hot that we're *dripping* with sweat down here—the heat is just at that level where your forehead gets a bit damp with sweat just by walking around, and the humidity creates this sensation of being just slightly sluggish all day long, no matter what you do.

Before actually stepping through the Go-Between, I hadn't really understood what the other receptionists had been talking about. *Why, of course if you're*

walking around all the time, you'll have better circulation, and that'll result in a higher body temperature, right? I'd thought that after arriving here I'd understand what they'd been trying to tell me about the heat.

"Hey, Bell! What are you doing?!"

I've just stepped through the Go-Between. I haven't had so much as a *second* to take in my new surroundings before all my attention is drawn to one, very strange sight: there's a near-naked woman lying down on the ground, inside the confines of the rear break area of the Soreiyu District office. *I do believe she's... "tanning?"*

All my worries about climate and humidity and whatever else disappear in an instant at this unexpected sight.

"Hm? Well now, y'all are a bit early in gettin' here, doncha think?"

Zozo sees the nearly-naked woman on the ground and instantly realizes what's going on. She stamps her feet in righteous indignation and yells, "We are *not* 'a bit early'! The workday's just about to start!"

Ms. Berryweather Landon. She lives in the same dorm as we do. Everyone calls her by the nickname "Bell." I believe her natural skin color is actually quite pale, but she tans so much that it's golden brown most of the time, not too different from Zozo's own dark brown skin. She keeps her curly blonde hair to about shoulder length, but right now she has it tied back into a ponytail.

Bell doesn't get up off the ground as she looks at me. "Morning, Nanalie," she says, giving me a wave. "Good morning," I say in return, but I find myself so distracted by her uncovered breasts and bare legs that I blush and find it difficult to make eye contact. *What's she thinking? Lying around like that in a place like this? I'd die of embarrassment if I were her and a male employee happened to walk by.*

I look around nervously to see if anyone else happens to be noticing how Ms. Bell looks right now. Ms. Bell seems to understand what I'm thinking. "'s alright," she says, waving away my concerns. "Everyone's used to this. I lie down here every morning before work. The weather's good today, you know, and I'm on the day shift. There's nothing like a good tanning session before work. Hasn't anyone told you about me before?"

In fact, I believe someone *has* told me about Ms. Bell and her antics before.

One day while I was working, a sorceress wearing a rather risqué getup came into Harré to accept a job request. After she left the building, all of the other receptionists broke out into whispered conversation.

Ms. Harris, who'd seen the sorceress, said something like, "My goodness, she looked like she took fashion advice from Berryweather, don't you think?" I'd only ever seen Ms. Bell walking around the dorm wearing perfectly normal outfits, so this remark by Ms. Harris had been rather puzzling to me. Zozo herself had also never seen Ms. Bell in her current getup. I remember her asking Ms. Harris, "Does she really dress like that?" While Zozo has come to help out the Soreiyu branch office from time to time, she'd told me that she'd *never* seen Ms. Bell wear clothes that showed quite that much skin. But then again, Ms. Bell's rumored near-nude sunbathing only occurred in the early morning, and as Zozo only went to Soreiyu for occasional night shifts, she'd not yet stumbled across the sort of sight greeting our eyes this morning.

As I remember all those stories, I take another look at Ms. Bell. *She's quite something, isn't she? Although perhaps I should find her current behavior to be very impressive.*

She's her own person, that's for sure. I'm not certain if that means she's just an independent woman, or that she doesn't care what the people around her think about her behavior, but in any case, it sure takes guts to walk outside half-naked like that.

As a fellow receptionist, I must say that I'd appreciate it if she refrained from exposing *that* much of her skin, but as Ms. Bell said, the people working in the Soreiyu District office seem used to this state of affairs. No one else is paying her, or her near-nudity, any mind whatsoever.

"I'd heard the rumors, sure, but that 'tanning outfit' you have on is just ridiculous."

"Hey now, don't go slanderin' the Holy Garments of Pre-Work Tanning."

"Girl, cut it out, please. I'm starting to feel embarrassed for you."

Zozo, in her own kind, patient manner, is trying to give advice to one of her

colleagues about her appearance, only to have her words completely ignored. She holds one hand against her forehead and sighs, then turns back towards me.

When she's irritated or confused, Zozo tends to massage the *sides* of her head, but when exasperated, she has the habit of pressing one hand against her forehead. I know she's calmed down when she smooths back her black, glossy hair away from her face, takes a deep breath, and then opens her eyes to look at me again.

"Nanalie, now that we're here in Soreiyu, I need to show you how to modify your uniform—or rather, I need to show you how to *use* your uniform."

"Use my uniform?" *What could that mean? Obviously, I know how to wear my uniform, but why's she talking like it's a tool to be "used"?*

"Yeah. The Director hasn't told you about this yet, has she?"

Now Ms. Bell gets up from where she's been sprawled out on the ground and starts walking towards Zozo. *I don't see any of her clothes lying around on the ground.* She's getting closer and closer, still half-nude. I'm torn between asking Zozo what, exactly, I haven't been told yet and asking Ms. Bell to kindly put some clothes on. I'm so flustered that I end up saying nothing to either of them.

Ms. Bell seems confused by my silence, then shrugs. "You ain't gotta even ask," she says, nodding as she stands next to Zozo, apparently offering to be her model for whatever she's about to teach me.

"Each person's uniform has a different type of functionality, of course, but there are some aspects that are the same."

"Like the three lines and the color scheme?"

All Harré employees receive exactly one uniform from the *Gígnesthai Nero*. They don't get dirty. If mud gets on them, all it takes is a gentle wipe and it all comes off. It absorbs sweat, but magically enough, the sweat disappears from the material. No odor can cling to the fabric, so there's no need to wash it. Should it become frayed or ripped, it'll mend itself instantly and go back to looking like new. Harré uniforms are one of the few items of clothing that are truly both "all-purpose" and "all-weather."

With a gentle *pat*, I dust off my spotless white sleeves out of habit.

“Well, sure,” Zozo says. “But they also have something else in common. We haven’t had any super hot days yet, and it’s not cold like it is during Distant Skies, so I haven’t had a reason to show you this yet, but...”

As she’s talking, Zozo rolls up the long sleeves on her uniform. She does so quite tightly, creating thick bands of sleeve material around her upper arms, just above her elbows. *What’s she about to do?* I watch as Zozo takes in a deep breath, and then begins blowing on those rolled up sleeves.

“Whoa...”

I almost couldn’t believe my eyes. The rolled-up uniform fabric simply disappeared, and now her sleeves were only half as long. Her dainty, slender forearms are now exposed to the sun.

I blink several times in surprise at the sudden disappearance of part of her uniform. Ms. Bell laughs at me. “It is kinda mysterious, right? I think I had the same face you do when I first saw that.”

What’s mysterious to me is not the literal fact of the fabric’s disappearance, but the reminder that I actually have no idea what the Harré uniforms are made of. My uniform, just like the Director had told me when I got it, is the “Dress of Nullification.” It repels any attack that comes my way: it’ll reflect lightning, and even should I be engulfed in flames, I won’t burn. It nullifies all spells that try to affect my body, except those that I cast myself.

I remember feeling like this uniform was too great a gift for me to receive.

Zozo’s uniform, on the other hand, is imbued with the power of invisibility. Even without using a Coat of Many Colors spell, she can easily become invisible whenever she wants. One time I’d had her show me how it works, and when she activated the invisibility function, it seemed like she was literally melting into thin air. I couldn’t sense her presence in the slightest. I was glad it was a trusted friend like her that owned such a powerful uniform. *Just think, if a man had a uniform like that, where he could become totally undetectable at will, it’d be awful! I know it’s a bit sexist for me to think that way, but I am deeply relieved that it is my cute little friend and mentor, Zozo, that owns that particular uniform.*

But then again, I don't suppose the Gígnesthai Nero would give a uniform with that ability to someone who'd use it for illicit purposes.

"How does that work?!" I ask.

"I don't really understand it either, but the breath of the uniform's owner can change its shape. You don't have to necessarily blow on it, I suppose—might be a bit gross, but drool or blood works too, even tears. If the person that owns the uniform gets a little bit of their bodily fluids on the fabric, they can change its shape."

"I think I'll stick to blowing on mine." *Obviously. As if I'd do otherwise!*

"Then, when you want to make it go back to how it was before, just blow on the sleeves as you stretch them out. You might get a little lightheaded, of course, if you try to do it all at once—but it's not too difficult, really."

Ms. Bell holds up one hand. "Having said that, you can't change the basic style of your uniform, 'kay? Like, Nanalie, you can't turn your skirt into a pair of pants, and Zozo can't turn her trousers into a skirt. You can make what you have longer or shorter, but that's all."

"It all sounds very interesting!" I mean that, really. *Now that I know about this feature of my uniform, it's like being given a brand new toy to play with!* "Hmm, let's see how this works..." I start rolling up my sleeves just like Zozo did, until they're all bunched around my upper arms, and then I start blowing on them. At first, I can't tell if it's working or not, but after about ten seconds, I can definitely tell that the rolled-up sleeves are disappearing. It doesn't happen all at once—slowly, little by little, it goes, goes, and then it's gone.

I wave around my newly bared arms, appreciating just how much cooler I feel. *The other receptionists were right. The humidity here does make it feel a bit warmer than it actually is. I might be imagining this, but I do feel that it is slightly, ever so slightly easier to work up a sweat here than it was up north. The breeze feels nice and cool, but the way the sunlight feels on my skin is different. And it's not just the humidity in the air that's causing me to feel that strange dampness—it's as if my own sweat clings to my body a bit more here.*

The Season of Flowers usually has warm weather, but what I'm experiencing now down here in the south can't be simply called "warm." But it's not hot,

either. *I'm not sure how I'd explain it to someone who's never been here before. I suppose that's why the other receptionists had a hard time explaining it to me.*

"She's a bit of an odd one, isn't she? Interesting, but *odd*."

"My thoughts exactly."

Both of the other receptionists are watching me with incredulity as I shorten and lengthen the sleeves on my uniform over and over again. I don't try experimenting with anything else, because I find this simple action and its reverse to be *fascinating*. When I see the slow changes of the fabric, the sense of satisfaction is similar to how I felt upon casting my first successful spell years ago. Something I find particularly interesting is the fact that the embroidery on the edges of my sleeves initially disappears from view when I roll them up, obviously, but when I blow on the bunched fabric to shorten them, the exact same design quickly reappears on the edges of my newly shortened sleeves.

As I'm standing here toying with my uniform, it's getting closer to the start of the day shift. More and more employees are emerging from the Go-Between and coming over to join our little circle. When they hear how excited I'm getting over just learning how to modify my uniform, they all burst out laughing. "Hey! You don't need to laugh *that* hard," I pout, frowning a little back at them.

"So-sorry," one of them says, nearly keeling over with laughter. "It's just that we've *never* seen someone react like that before!"

They may tease me a little more than they need to, but basically all the people at the Soreiyu branch seem to be nice, friendly people.

One of the male receptionists takes a look at Ms. Bell and what she's wearing—or rather, *not* wearing—and claps one hand against his forehead in exasperation. "Are you *still* walking around like that at this hour?"

"This is the branch notice board."

The Soreiyu guild hall is about a quarter of the size of the Harré headquarters. Ten employees work in this branch: three receptionists that work with sorcerers, two receptionists that work with clients, two male employees that do clerical work in the back offices, and three others who take care of the

fieldwork.

One of the receptionists assigned to fieldwork is someone the Director mentioned when she was telling me about who at Harré could perform psychometry, Mr. Yakkurin. He's the older brother of one of my former classmates, and the first time I walked into Harré, I'd recognized how familiar his name was and that his face resembled that of his little sister, Kara Yakkurin. Kara had told me about a brother who was several years older than her, so on a hunch I asked if they were related, and what do you know? They are. I sometimes see him at Harré headquarters, and we say hello to each other. He's the type of guy that women my mother's age would call a "nice young man" — unlike most of the other men at Harré, who tend to be in their thirties or forties, he's only twenty-five years old.

That's why he is, or perhaps, *another* reason why he is so popular with the female employees.

On top of his youth and general good image is the fact that he's single, which makes all the single women at work practically giddy with dreams of becoming "the one" for him. According to what Zozo's told me, however, he *does* have a girlfriend, and she's his childhood friend at that. I'm not sure why Zozo would know that.

Speaking of Zozo, right now she and Ms. Bell are guiding me around inside the building, showing me where the lavatory and the break room are, where the employee library and the nap room are located, and finally they bring me into the main office space just behind the reception counters. I already know all of the employees working here in the Soreiyu District, so I don't have to go through any sort of formal introduction or anything. Everyone I see just gives me a smile and says, "Glad to have you here with us," which is about the best thing anyone could say to me right now.

Ms. Bell finally gets around to changing into her white uniform. She's the one who informed all the other employees that I'll be working here for the next month. After we've finished making our rounds, Ms. Bell takes us over to the notice board and shows us what kind of requests we'll be dealing with for the next month.

I squint a bit as I try to make out the details in fine print on the requests, but even without looking very closely I know exactly what kind of requests are common here: quite unlike the notice board at headquarters, requests for exorcisms practically fill the board, placed together so closely that the edges of the papers overlap.

“There’s a good deal of requests that deal with demons,” I say, trying to take it all in.

Ms. Bell nods her head heavily. “Take care of one demon and another will take its place, and if you get rid of *that* one, two more will appear! It’s always like this,” she says, sighing. “Especially during Flower Season. I wish we could just hurry up and be done with it.”

“You’ve been pretty busy, haven’t you, Bell?” Zozo pats her back and gives her a sympathetic smile. “It’s not only demons you’re dealing with, but perverts too! Must be tough.”

Ms. Bell shakes her head in disgust. “All these lovestruck loons have gotten just a little carried away with the seasonal festivities this year.”

“That’s for sure,” Zozo says, nodding.

From what they tell me, while there certainly are a lot of demon-related requests, there’s also been an increase in the number of women reporting stalkers following them around, and then there are the pranksters who seem to find it amusing to terrify little kids from the orphanage nearby. It sounds like the Order of Knights’ Fifth Platoon took care of those pranksters. The Fifth Platoon is commonly called the “Citizen’s Aid Company.” They keep the peace in the Kingdom, just like any other platoon, but they are also assigned the unique role of patrolling the streets throughout the Kingdom. I often see them when I’m out and about in town.

Ringaling! The bell attached to the guild hall’s door chimes as someone walks inside. *We don’t have a bell on the door up at headquarters. Those little chimes make it feel like it’s an old-timey bookshop or something in here.*

“Berryweather here?”

Zozo, Ms. Bell, and I all turn to face the man who’s just come in. Apparently

he has some business with Ms. Bell, since he asked for her by name. It's still early in the morning so there aren't many sorcerers in here yet, and his voice echoes a bit as he calls out for her.

As soon as I get a good look at him, I realize—

He walks up to the reception counter. “Oh hey, there you are. You got those records for all the demons that have shown up here down south in the past month? And the notes on what they look like? Also, I’m in a bit of a rush, again—sorry about that.”

Ms. Bell answers his request with a bright, sincere smile. “Why, Captain, welcome to Harré! We do indeed have those records! Please wait here a moment while I go and fetch them, okay?” She goes hopping off to the back offices.

“Thanks, I appreciate it.”

Hadn't she just been completely distraught by all the reports of perverts in the area? What happened to that attitude? Perhaps it's her philosophy to never show anything but a smile to guild visitors. So there's no chance she's acting all cutesy right now just so this guy will like her, right? Right?!

Zozo notices the grim look on my face. She leans over to whisper in my ear. “The Soreiyu District is the jurisdiction of the First Platoon. On occasion, members of the Third and Eighth will show up here too. Twice a month, someone from the Order comes here to exchange information with us about demon activity, and to recast the spells that maintain the defense barrier.”

“Hmm...so that's how it works here.”

Ms. Bell's gone, and *he's* just loitering near the reception desks. In other words, he's standing right next to me. I squint up at him in suspicion. He has that full-body black robe on, but unlike when I last saw him two months ago, isn't wearing his hood today, so I can get a good look at his face. *I can't imagine how hot he must be inside that thick, black robe. I'm in short sleeves, but just looking at him makes me feel like I'm going to start sweating.*

There isn't a single bead of sweat on his brow as he looks down at me, apparently as cool as can be. His crimson eyes meet mine, and he raises one

eyebrow, blinking a few times as if he's making some sort of surprising discovery in the wild. He's—well, not smiling, but something close to it.

I can't read minds, so I'm a bit puzzled as to where that friendly grin he'd had on his face until just moments ago has gone. Zozo's still right here next to me, so it's not like we're alone. It's rather refreshing to witness this abrupt shift in expression. *I feel like I've caught him off guard or something.*

Still, I despair at my horrible ill luck. *On the exact day I arrive, he just happens to show up for one of his bimonthly meetings. How likely is that? What am I, cursed or something? Next weekend, I need to go to the temple and get myself Purified. I can't go around being haunted for the rest of my life.*

"Let me guess—you were demoted?" Rockmann looks truly worried as he says this, as if he's thinking, *"Ah. The Director's finally given up on her. I knew it'd happen eventually, but still, a sad sight to see."*

To which my answer is:

Who the hell are you to be going around saying crap like that?!

My package was returned (despite all my efforts). He drank me under the table (after I challenged him). He carried me back to the dorms over his shoulder like I was some sort of ragdoll (because I was passed out drunk). Ever since then, the dorm mother has seemed to be laboring under the delusion that something is going on between us (infuriating). All that has been almost all my fault, of course, but that doesn't change the fact that it's been frustrating beyond belief to have to keep dealing with this fool.

My face tenses up as I'm caught between forcing a smile and staring daggers at him. "Would you kindly *shut up* with your lies?" I crack my knuckles for good measure. They say your fingers will get thick if you crack them, but I don't care about having dainty, ladylike hands. I'd actually prefer they get as thick and strong as they can, so I can pack a better punch.

Rockmann takes his blond hair (which is depressingly long for a man) and tucks it behind his ears, like it's in the way of him giving me an expression that shows how tediously bored he is with my antics. *How rude! He has to know that super "calm and collected" face he's making at me right now is pissing me off.*

“Hey,” I say, affronted, “you’re being rude to everyone in here, you know.”

Strangely enough, none of his fellow Knights have followed him inside. But I suppose I don’t know that much about his work, and perhaps he goes out on his own quite often.

“You’re right. I’m sorry, everyone. Oh, wait—you know I’m not apologizing to *you*, right?”

“You little brat!”

Without a moment’s hesitation, I lift my leg to stomp his foot like the insect he is. I’d really rather use magic, but I hold myself back from that because we’re inside the Guild. *There are people watching. I guess I shouldn’t go any further than crushing every bone in his foot. “Mercy” is something even I’m capable of, after all.*

But Rockmann’s too quick for me. The instant my leg rises, he instinctively steps sideways, then sideways again as I slam my foot down over and again.

“Quit running away from me!”

“Oho, we can’t have you thinking I’m *running* now, can we?” His own leg darts out now, aiming to crush my right foot.

I’m not the kind of girl who can be defeated that easily, however. With a flash, I dodge, flex every muscle in my right leg in anticipation of *obliterating* Rockmann’s left foot, make my attack—and pound the floor. *Dodged again!*

Poundpoundpoundpoundpound...

We do not speak as we attack each other, evade, counterattack, and then evade again.

Ms. Bell reappears. “Uh...what’s all this about?”

And the battle is over.

In the end, I never did manage to step on his toes, but then again he never stepped on mine, either, so I guess we’ll call it a draw.

Now he’s back over at the counter talking to Ms. Bell as if nothing out of the ordinary has happened. As if he hadn’t just been frantically attempting to crush

the foot of some woman.

I attempt to hide my irritation by folding my arms and turning to Zozo for comfort. *Wait, what's that look on her face?*

"Why do you always...act like that?" she says, quietly, sighing as she looks at me with something like sadness in her eyes.

"Like that?" What does she mean? I don't think she's insulting me, but...
"Sorry," I say. Sometimes apologizing is simply the best thing to do, even if you're not quite sure what you're apologizing for.

How stupid of me, though, to lose my mind like that while I'm on the job! It's not like I intended to get violent, but really, I do have to start acting like the adult that I should be—the adult that I am. Maybe I'm just not mentally there yet. I suppose I should work on that.

"Well, we can't spend all day just standing in front of the notice board, now can we? Come on," Zozo says, leading me back behind the reception counter.

The way they do things here in the Soreiyu office is a bit different from headquarters, but the basics are the same. Zozo and I switch out with the two receptionists sitting at the client reception counter. (They're heading out into the field, apparently.) I'm happy to be finally sitting at a reception desk, of course, but I'm still feeling a bit flustered after what just happened. The two other receptionists, however, smile at me and say, "We're so glad you're here," and those words are enough to make me feel right at home. *To them, even a newbie like me is a big help. Based on how many requests I saw posted up on the notice board, I'm sure there are plenty of preliminary investigations that need to be done. With me here, the paperwork will be done a little faster, and everyone's jobs will get a little easier. I hope.*

Zozo pulls out stacks of paper from under the desk. "Alright then, we don't have any clients yet, so let's take care of that thing the Director asked us to do."

"Sounds good." I look down at the papers piled on the desk. The Director has asked us to go through requests made here at Soreiyu and pass along any that look like they could be taken care of at headquarters. There are more sorcerers and employees up north, so it's more efficient than letting them all stack up down here.

I remove the wooden clasp off of the stack of paper, and together Zozo and I begin scanning them for important information and sorting them into different piles. I take my special pen out from its pouch on my belt, just in case I need to mark something up. It's a green pen with a gold pattern of twisting vines inlaid onto the case. The vine pattern is identical to the one on my uniform.

This lovely little pen of mine is something I bought at Peropepéne's Stationery Store, soon after I began working as a receptionist. With my first earnings from Harré in hand, I'd gone shopping there, carefully looking through everything in the store before deciding on this one.

Peropepéne's is a store known in the northern towns as dealing in somewhat expensive stationery. They aren't quite at the level where they're supplying the royal family with pens and paper, but they count a number of mid-to upper-level aristocrats among their patrons. Also, I should mention that while expensive, they aren't *exclusive*, so as long as you aren't too dirty and have money to pay, they'll treat you well. I'd opened the store door feeling rather nervous, but the old man running the store had given me such a nice smile it had set my mind completely at ease. He'd been most kind as I'd browsed around the store, explaining the merits of different pens for different types of hands or writing styles. I'd never felt like he was trying to force anything on me. After he'd told me about all the pens, he'd told me to "take my time" and left me to my own devices, adding that I should ask him if I needed anything.

There are good, respectable people working in every profession. I wonder—if I hadn't encountered that receptionist at Harré all those years ago, would I now be working to become the owner of a bookstore instead? I'd enjoyed the experience so much it had made me imagine that alternate life I could've lived.

The memory wipes away any remaining irritation I'd felt upon Rockmann's appearance, and I'm finally able to concentrate on my work again. *That store was such a good store, just the memory of it makes me feel happy. It's probably due to the kindness of the owner more than the store itself, I suppose.*

I read the request descriptions on the forms in front of me.

"In the evenings, I hear a strange sound through the walls of my house. It sounds like it's coming from the lake. A neighbor, who fishes there during the

day, tells me that he's seen dark shadows in the water. Possibly a demon. Fish carcasses are floating up to the surface and are just laying there on the water. They grow more numerous, day after day. Please, do something about it."

"There's a round black thing on my walls. Looks like an insect. I've been trying for days, but I can't seem to get it off. It looks like it's growing larger, day by day. I don't know if this matters, but all of the magical plants in my garden are withering and everyone in my family has been feeling ill lately. I want someone to come out and remove the thing from my wall, then figure out the cause of all this."

"On my way to Steel Mountain, I encountered a wolf with dark violet fur. I managed to run away, but ever since then I haven't been able to go to the mountain and pick the herbs I need. Can someone please exorcise the place?"

After I finish reading the requests, I put the ones I'll take back to headquarters in a pile to my right and the ones I won't in a pile to my left. Naturally, I'm not making these decisions entirely on my own—I make sure to check with Zozo before I decide left or right. She herself asks me for my opinion on the requests she's going through, too. Slowly but surely, we go on sorting the papers together.

"Do you think these three would be good to take back to headquarters?" I ask her.

"Yeah, I think so. What about this one?"

"Seems like the problem's north of here, so it should be good to take back. I think one of our regular sorcerers lives in that neighborhood."

"She's sure to have a lot of experience in the area, so it's an even better reason to have her do it."

We receptionists have generally memorized a good deal of information about the sorcerers that come into Harré. There are, of course, files on each sorcerer available in the employee library, but it'd take up so much time if we were constantly reading those. That's why for most of them, if we have their name and know what they look like, we make sure to be able to recall what type they are, what jobs they've done, and other facts about their background. Of course that doesn't mean we *never* look at the files when recommending them a

request—plus, we also consult with them personally about what’s available, and in the end they’re the ones who choose what requests they want to take care of. Obviously, we don’t have their home addresses memorized or anything, but we do know what region of the Kingdom they call home.

The receptionists who work the sorcerer desks have to keep all that information in mind when balancing the interests of the sorcerer with the needs of the job, and then deciding which requests to give to them. It’s a lot of information to keep track of, which is why Harré tends to hire people with good memories.

“This one and this one are probably good too.”

“Yes, those seem fine.”

Once we’ve begun, the rest is easy. Zozo, veteran receptionist that she is, zips through the papers and moves them left, right, left. I try to do what I can to help her, carefully reading every line on the request forms, then carefully placing them in one of the piles. The pile of papers slowly grows smaller.

I love clerical work. There’s that indescribable pleasure of seeing a stack of forms slowly disappear. Sure, my eyes get tired, and I can’t use magic, so it’s not the most exciting way to pass the time, but the process itself is rewarding, somehow.

As I’m focusing on my paperwork, I glance up from time to time at the guild door to make sure I’m aware of any clients as soon as they come in. It’s an old, creaky door, nothing like the thick metal one back at headquarters. It drags on the wooden floor when you open it, and it has a bell attached. I hear it ring, look up, and see someone has come in.

“Captain.”

But it isn’t a sorcerer. It’s just a woman wearing the same uniform as Rockmann, so I look back down. Her footsteps echo as she approaches—but then she goes to the sorcerer receiving desks, where Rockmann’s talking with Ms. Bell.

So he isn’t alone today after all.

No sorcerers are in the Guild at the moment, and all the receptionists are

quiet as they work. In the small interior of the hall, I can hear them speaking on the other side of the room.

From what fragments I can hear, this woman from the First Platoon, who'd been waiting outside, had grown impatient with how long Rockmann was taking and so decided to come in to check on him. *"You're just here to pick up some papers!" "We should get back to the castle." "We still have work to do!"* and so on and so forth. Just listening to her speak is distracting, so I force myself to ignore her and focus on the task at hand. *I've got to focus. What part was I reading?* I scan the request form in my hands.

I'm busily looking through papers when all of a sudden a shadow falls across my desk.

I'd ignored their conversation, but I have to be ready to help anyone who comes up to my desk, so I know instantly who's standing in front of me right now: a beautiful woman with blue eyes, her silky brown hair flowing down over her left shoulder as she leans forward ever so slightly. She's looking down at me.

"Goodness gracious, why if it isn't Ms. Hel. It's been some time, hasn't it?"

"Hello, Ms. Weldy. Yes, it has been a while."

She's wearing the same robe over her Knight's uniform that Rockmann is, and looks as though she doesn't feel the heat in the slightest. *Not only that, but she's wearing gloves. Every part of her body is covered except for her face and neck. Surely she feels at least a little warm?*

"Have you been transferred here?"

I carefully set aside my papers in order to explain the situation. *It would be painfully embarrassing to have her think I was unceremoniously "demoted" like Rockmann did.*

"...So that's why I'm here, not because I was transferred, but as part of my training as a new employee."

"Is that so? Hmmm..." She nods her head. "Harré certainly knows how to educate their staff members well."

What's that supposed to mean? I don't get a chance to clarify further, however, as she soon changes the subject to begin talking about herself (to no one's surprise).

She talks about what kinds of demons she's fought recently, how she killed them, which restaurants she's become obsessed with, how wonderful it is to find Rockmann asleep at his desk (what?), how she wants to have a new suit of armor made for her, and on and on and *on* with barely a word from me.

"Brunel talks about you a lot, you know, so I've come to know—quite by accident, mind you—your likes and dislikes, among other things."

"Do you talk about me that often?"

"Oh! Speaking of things we like, I don't 'like' or 'dislike' that much in particular, you know? I'm not picky. Captain Alois seems like he's the same way, so perhaps that's why we get along."

"You might be right about that."

"Speaking of 'getting along,' I was talking with Drografia the other day—he's a Knight, you know—and sometimes his pegasus—"

Ms. Weldy goes on gesturing and gesticulating with great enthusiasm as she continues talking. I watch her, trying to make sense of it all.

Is she...killing time...by talking with me?

Rockmann must've dismissed her after she'd tried to interrupt his meeting with Ms. Bell. She *must* be over here to kill time.

When I first met her, she left me with the impression that she was a cool, reserved woman, but now I can see I was completely mistaken about her. I'd only had how she looked to make my judgment on, so it's no surprise I was wrong. As we're chatting with each other, I can tell that she's passionate about her job, has the usual feminine fascination with love and romance, and many other interests besides. This is only the second time we've met, but here she is, talking to me as if we're old friends.

I'd been shocked when she'd lectured me at that first meeting. The difference between now and then, I think, is the reason why hearing her tell me all these

things about her private life makes my heart pound a little.

From time to time I nod, agree, and chime in with my opinion on whatever she's just said. Zozo's at the counter next to me, arms folded and listening closely to our conversation. Apparently she's finished sorting the papers, because now even the ones that had been in front of me are gone. *I guess she took care of that while I was listening to Ms. Weldy. Sorry, Zozo! I'm glad it's morning right now so no sorcerers can witness me slacking off at work like this.*

"By the way, Ms. Hel—have you decided who you'll be giving flowers to?"

"Excuse me? 'Giving flowers to'?"

Ms. Weldy's suddenly changed the topic of conversation and I'm a little thrown off.

Where in the world did that come from?

"Like—I—said," she says, drawing out each word, "who are you planning to give flowers to?"

"Well, Ms. Weldy, what about you? Who will you be giving flowers to?"

"Me? Oh, you know...hahaha."

"To the Captain?"

I point over at the likely suspect of her affections.

"Goodness! Can you *not* take that suggestive tone with me?! Whatever do you mean by it?!"

I, who am looking over at the guy Ms. Weldy's been dragging on about for the last eternity, find myself being urged to "put away my finger" by a panicked Ms. Weldy in a strained, hushed voice. Her cheeks grow flushed with embarrassment, which she tries to hide by covering them with her hands.

"Oh, dearie me! It's just that there are *so many* murderous women after the Captain! He's only half as popular as His Highness Prince Zenon, man's man that he is, but the Captain isn't just nice to aristocrats, but even lowly commoner women like myself, and so, so kind and honest—oh, I just can't bear to let my guard down around him, I don't want to imagine what might happen."

“You call that kind? He’s just a womanizer, you know. The Prince seems more kind and honest than *that guy* ever is.”

The Prince is a good guy, inside and out. In fact, the Prince has always been more my type of man, much better than *him*. That’s just talking about my “type,” of course. I’m not about to go confessing my love for His Highness. Literally everyone would start thinking of me as some “uppity commoner girl” at that point.

“The word ‘honest’ has a lot of meanings, you know. Not that a kid like you would understand.” She makes a little *hmph!* of disappointment and shakes her head at my “naivety.”

I’ll have you know that this “kid” you’re talking to is the same age as Rockmann, girl.

She’ll never be able to understand his “kindness.” To be frank, there’s not a single time I can recall that he’s been kind to me (not that I’ve been kind to him, either). But I won’t argue that he is indeed conspicuously chivalrous to other women. Equally to all of them, at that. Perhaps too equally. Were I a stranger and saw him consorting with some woman on the street, I’m pretty sure I’d think he was some sort of philanderer. Not that he isn’t, of course. But on the other hand, as far as I know, he’s never lied to anyone and led them on by returning any sort of affection. Somehow that’s made him even more popular. Any normal guy who did that wouldn’t find women chasing him around like Rockmann does, and yet all those girls back at school, at around graduation, started saying things like “He’s not married yet, so I can’t be certain he doesn’t like me!” Masochistic girls, the lot of them.

“A womanizer he may be,” Ms. Weldy says, “but there are many such noble lords who do the same. If I’m the only one he truly loves, well, shouldn’t that be good enough?”

“Those are just the words of some good-for-nothing woman who’s in love with a playboy.”

“*I beg your pardon, Ms. Hel?! Where did that come from? Did you say that? With this mouth? This mouth?!*” She pinches my cheeks with both hands and yanks me up out of my chair. “You don’t get to just say anything you like if you

say it with a smile, you know!” My cheeks are very much in pain by the time she gets done with me, and at last she’s just squeezing my mouth open and shut, humming a little tune of vengeance to herself as she plays with my face.

Once she’s finally let me go, I carefully lay my hands against my bright red cheeks and chill them. *Being an Ice-Type is worth it for times like this.*

“Ah, if only he were to confess his love for me atop the Flower Garden’s Tower...” She sighs and closes her eyes to imagine the scene.

“The Flower Garden’s Tower?”

“Weldy, we’re leaving.” Rockmann waves goodbye to Ms. Bell as he calls out to Ms. Weldy.

The *instant* he says her name, she leaves the counter where Zozo and I are sitting and walks towards the door with him without so much as a glance backwards.

“Love sure is strange,” Zozo says.

“Yes,” I nod my head, “but as the ancestors said, humans cannot live without it.”

All at once, my idle chitter-chatter with Ms. Weldy is finished. *She wasted absolutely no time in getting over to Rockmann. If I blinked, I’d have thought she teleported. Amazing.*

Was it because he’s her Captain and he ordered her that she chased after him so quickly? Or was it because it was Rockmann calling out for her? I hear her continuing to call after him. “Captain, Captainnnn!” *Perhaps it was both of those reasons.*

Rockmann opens the door and pulls her outside. I watch the door close, then turn to Zozo. We both let out a deep sigh of relief. *It’s over.*

“Now that we’re done sorting,” I say, “what’s next?” It doesn’t look like clients are about to start arriving. *If there’s something that I can busy myself with to take my mind off that whole interaction, I’d very much like to do so.*

“Hmm, let me think. Ah, yeah, let’s have you take a look at a map of the area here. Memorizing the landmarks would be a good idea. I’ll try to find one...hold

on a second.” Zozo gets up and heads to the back office area to search for a map. I’m a little nervous at the prospect of being alone as a newcomer here, but I stay in my seat and try to do like I always do back at headquarters. That’s what the Director told me to do, after all. I take a deep breath, chill out, and calmly wait for Zozo’s return.

She’s taking a rather long time. Is that a spell I hear?

Faintly, I hear Zozo chanting behind me, “*Map, pocus!*” (Reveal yourself.)

—*Ringaling!*

The door opens. Someone comes in. *Surely this time it’ll be a sorcerer or a client, right?* When I look over to check, however, it’s none other than the recently-departed Rockmann.

I have no idea why he’s come back. He marches straight towards me and the sound of his boots against the wood floor echoes in the hall. One of the receptionists over at the sorcerer’s desk calls out, “Captain? Was there something else you needed?” Rockmann just smiles at her and shakes his head.

He stands right in front of my desk, bends over to place his face near my own, and lays one hand gently against the side of my neck. There’s a sharp, fierce glint in his eyes as he looks at me between strands of his golden hair, unblinking.

“Let me ask just one thing of you,” he says quietly, his mouth right next to my ear. It’s at this distance that I smell, ever so faintly and without any intention to, the hint of something like perfume. It’s the smell of freshly laundered pajamas or bath soap. It’s a smell that makes me want to close my eyes and let sleep carry me away.

I confess: I rather like this smell.

I snap out of it. “Huh? No.” *I don’t like him getting this close.* I take one hand and shove his face away—far away. The fact that he nearly lured me off to sleep with just the way he smells has me on edge. *Terrifying bastard, that’s what he is.* I’m irritated at the momentary lapse in my watchfulness. I start pushing his pretty face away, over and over, to make the message clear.

“...If you don’t stop that right now, you’ll get worse than what you’re giving.”

“Not that I care!”

I sigh. *No matter how much I pinch and pull the skin on his face, I can never manage to turn it into anything ugly. It's rather frustrating. The only thing left for me to do is shove my fingers up his nose, I suppose.* I pause, looking for an opening.

But he's not the type to just let me do that. “Gah, you're a pain, you know that?”

He counterattacks. “Mmmmph!!” He tightly grips my whole face with one hand. *Snap!* I feel like I hear something break inside my skull. *Ouch!!* Through the gaps in his fingers, I can see his hateful face smiling at me, with evil, evil eyes, narrow as threads, glaring back at me. *Okay, yeah, this hurts a lot more than whatever I was doing just now.*

“Owowowowowowow! Why do I have to listen to anything *you* have to say?!”

I hit his arm several times. I also pound the desk I'm sitting at for good measure. *If he keeps this up, he's gonna crush my bones! My face will be crushed!*

“Be quiet and *listen*,” he says, grabbing my hand that's pounding the table and leaning in close to me again. He keeps his hand on my face.

Dammit! I told myself I wouldn't allow myself to cast spells inside the guild hall! Without my magic, there's no way I can beat this guy, not on arm strength alone.

And so, unwillingly, unfortunately, I am forced to resort to extreme tactics.

“O-okay, I'll listen! I'll listen so just get your hands off me! I'm sorry for what happened earlier, it was my fault! Hey!”

I apologized.

“.....”

“What?”

“.....”

“What's that face for?”

He looks like he's thinking.

"If someone asks you if you're an Ice-Type witch," he finally says, "don't answer them."

He still has his hand on my face. Granted, his grip is a little looser, so it doesn't hurt like it did before. *I should applaud his persistence, however—he doesn't believe me for a second that I'll listen to him if he sets me free! He's totally right, of course.*

"Huh?"

I don't understand what he's trying to tell me.

"If someone asks you what type you are, tell them you're a Water Witch. Never tell anyone that you're an Ice-type."

"But *why?*"

Likely because I've now shown him I'm actually interested in having a conversation with him, he finally lets go of my face. "I'll remember that, you pompous prick." I glare fiercely back at him as I massage my chin and forehead back into shape. The guy who looks back at me has this sinister smile on his face, as if he's just pulled off the world's best prank. *Hateful. Completely hateful. Don't laugh at me like that!*

"There's a certain country that wants Ice Witches. So, you know, I want you to be careful."

"You wouldn't happen to be talking about that business with Orcinus, would you?"

Now it all makes sense.

I remember what Mr. Drografia had been talking about at the tavern with the other Knights. *They talked about how the Knights are on guard against Orcinus, which is trying to collect Ice Witches, and also taking a census on the number of Ice-Type witches present inside the Kingdom.*

"Lately, we've warned to stay on alert for this sort of stuff, and...well, you're an Ice-Type. I'm not at all worried about *you*, but the Commander's ordered us to give the same advice to all Ice-Type witches we encounter."

“Oh, is that so?”

“Anyway, that’s all I have to say. Don’t be lured by the prospect of that salary.”

“As if I would!”

Rockmann walks away without another word, waves goodbye without turning around, and this time he really does leave Harré.

I don’t know much about Orcinus, but since Rockmann went so far as to tell me that, I guess I should do as he says. I hadn’t even imagined he’d been trying to warn me about something. For him to have come all the way back inside to tell me that must mean it’s quite serious. If it wasn’t, he’d never tell me to “be careful.”

Anyhow, did Zozo ever find that map? I haven’t heard her moving about for some time. She’s probably just searching quietly.

I turn around. She has the map gripped tightly in one hand, and is standing next to one of the male clerks. They’re both staring at me in what appears to be total shock. I find their behavior a bit strange, but I’m glad she’s found the map.

“So you were able to find the map after all. Thank you very much, Ms. Zozo.”

“Oh, uh, sure. No problem.”

I’d tried to imply in my thanks to Zozo that I wanted her to come over to where I am sitting, but she’s still standing next to the clerk, showing not the slightest intention of approaching me.

I look around the Guild. Ms. Bell, and all of the other employees, are staring right at me. I tilt my head to one side. *What’s everyone looking at?*

Finally, Zozo takes one step, then two, approaching me as if she’s trying to walk on eggshells.

“You and the Captain—are you *sure* you aren’t friends?”

“Nope, not friends. Absolutely not.”

Another day, another person making another weird assumption about Rockmann’s and my relationship. So it goes.

It's gone by all so fast.

In just two more days, it'll have been a full month since I arrived in the Soreiyu District. Each day seems to pass by quickly, but at the same time is so long that my eyelids are drooping heavily at the end of it.

After all, it's been so incredibly hectic every day.

I'd known before coming here that there aren't too many sorcerers in the area. Despite the large amount of work relating to demons in the District, few sorcerers live nearby—but I suppose that's *also* because there are so many demons around.

The result is that there aren't enough receptionists to go around to adequately staff the sorcerer desks—most of us are too busy trying to go through the veritable mountain of client requests and do as many preliminary investigations as possible. I'm trying to be as useful as I can be during my time here, but I feel sorry for everyone permanently based at Soreiyu.

In two days, I'll be heading back to headquarters. The other employees have even begun asking me things like, "You aren't thinking of requesting being transferred here permanently, are you?" Half of the time, I can't tell if they're joking or serious with their questioning, but it always makes me tear up a little. I'm not crying because I don't like being asked that—I just find myself so tragically worried about the state of the Soreiyu office after I leave that I feel guilty. I feel like I've been working myself down to the bone here, but they've all taken such good care of me. Whenever I'm looking a little too thin, they make sure I sit down and eat a steak or something to keep up my energy.

But it won't be like this forever—the Flower Season will be over soon enough, and with it the seasonal rise in demonic activity. The Director herself had visited to give everyone a pep talk, saying that this crazy state of affairs would be over "soon enough." The Soreiyu employees hadn't been too encouraged by these words, but when the Director had gone on to say that "once it's Distant Skies season, I'll treat all of you to 'red and black phoenix,' as much as you want, at one of the top restaurants in the Kingdom," they'd shown more enthusiasm for their work than I'd ever seen before.

I wonder if the whole “food as motivation” is a Director thing, or a Harré employee thing. We’re so busy, I don’t know how they have the energy to even think about eating something special months from now—but perhaps we Harré folks are a simple bunch.

“Yakkurin! Behind you! One of those scrawny little things!”

“Huh?! Ugh, it’s disgusting! Hel, blast it away or something!”

“Braggiarms Megistooooo!” (Super strength.)

I clench my fist and punch right at the little critter.

“Wheeeeeeeeeee...!” The demon is blasted away by the force of my hit. It flies up, up, up into the sky, until it winks out of existence and joins the stars.

Excited, Zozo claps in admiration. “Ahhh! Nanalie, you’re freaky strong!”

“Oh, it’s just a spell, you know!”

The demons keep popping up along the path. I send each one flying with a *“wheeee...”* or a *“whoooooo...”*, and we manage to continue making our way up the mountain.

The three of us are here on Steel Mountain for a preliminary investigation, and we find ourselves...being preyed upon by a horde of demons. A little while ago there’d been a request asking for someone to exorcise a wolf demon, but this time it seems like there’s a different type prowling the area. We’re here to find out what, exactly, it is.

The day had begun with completely clear, blue skies, but for some reason the sky right above Steel Mountain is a heavy, grayish color. *Must be the demons that are causing that.* I look up every time I send another demon flying into the heavens to watch it vanish.

The members of today’s team are Zozo, Yakkurin, and myself. This isn’t the first time we’ve gone into the field together—we’ve probably gone on seven or eight missions in the past month. This also isn’t my first visit to Steel Mountain. With its black and ash-gray trees, the whole mountain really does have the color of steel. Many medicinal herbs, tasty vegetables, and fruit-bearing trees grow here. No one owns it, and no matter how many herbs people pick, they

just come right back, so it's like this endless source of fruits and vegetables for the surrounding communities. Despite its appearance, it's surprisingly rich in resources, some of them likely as yet unknown. Many people come here trying to discover some new herb or fruit they can sell at the markets.

But of course, with a mountain like this that is teeming with life, it's also full of demons.

There's been between ten to fifteen exorcism requests this month, just for Steel Mountain. *Way too many. And despite the danger, people still come up here to pick wild fruits and vegetables. Are they so delicious that they're worth risking your life for?*

"Parasta, make sure you're keeping track of all this!"

"I got it, alright! Whoa, above you!"

"Kieohn!" (Ice pillar.)

A demon is falling down onto Yakkurin, so I instantly thrust out both arms to summon a pillar of ice. It grows from the palm of my hands like a plant would, only at the speed of sound. The pillar is so large it chills the air around us.

The little demon had tried to open up its mouth as wide as it could to swallow Yakkurin whole. Now, however, it's completely trapped inside my pillar of ice. It can't even move its eyes, which are now frozen solid, looking ahead at nothing at all.

I wait a few seconds to ensure that it isn't about to break free, then snap my fingers to shatter the ice. The demon inside shatters as well, breaking into tiny shards on the ground. Not even a single fragment of it remains.

Demons with only one eye, bodies the size of a human head.

Those little black spheres come bouncing towards us. We get rid of one and another soon replaces it.

Persistent! Irritatingly persistent!

It really would be nice to be able to use the Coat of Many Colors, but the demons would be able to see us even if we became "invisible." All we can do is continue to press forward. In contrast, Zozo's uniform and its special invisibility

feature seem to actually *work* against the demons for some reason, so she's going undetected as she makes notes on her clipboard about the amount of demons present, their type, and so on.

But the point of this investigation isn't even to deal with *these* demons—we're looking for one that has a much more animal-like shape. A demon larger than a wolf, larger even than the trees growing on this mountain. Apparently, however, a different bunch of demons sprang up here after the client came in to make their request. *They hadn't said anything about these guys!*

"Ahhh this isn't going anywhere! Blast 'em with ice!"

"But—"

"The Director told me that we need to avoid any injuries, so use that super strength you had earlier and that sword spell!"

"What?! Uh, okay!"

When we return to Harré, we go through the records we made during today's investigation. The three of us are at a back counter inside the guild hall, sitting around a table with a map of the area spread out over it.

Yakkurin sighs. "I'd really like to just ban humans from Steel Mountain altogether and be done with it."

Zozo shakes her head. "No, we can't do that—if we put up a magic barrier it'll dissolve soon enough, and we can't expect the Knights' Order to add that to their list of maintenance projects. Even if we were to put up a fence or something, there'd still be crowds of people forcing their way over."

"The place really is quite strange," I say, "but I suppose that makes sense. Dr. Aristo did refer to the mountain itself as a demon, you know?"

"Are you *still* reading books like that?" Zozo looks legitimately incredulous as she asks me this.

"Just in my spare time."

"Hel's the type who's a complete bookworm off the clock, right?"

Yakkurin runs a hand through his light brown hair and closes his eyes. He,

Rigel Yakkurin, is the older brother of one of my former classmates, Kara Yakkurin. I'd been somewhat surprised to discover he was working here. I knew that Kara had a brother, but certainly had no idea he worked at Harré. Having said that, though, I guess I hadn't exactly been open about where I'd intended to work in the future when talking with my friends—if I'd told Kara, I might have been able to ask her a lot of questions about her brother's experience before arriving. *But it probably would have been improper for me to have asked a bunch of questions about her brother, who I'd never even met. Perhaps it's best I didn't know about the connection until I arrived.*

"I like reading books. Reading books can calm the soul."

"I have literally no idea what that must feel like."

I'd thought they resembled each other when I'd first met him, but he didn't have that spontaneity that was so typical of Kara. After graduating, she told us all she was going to become an archaeologist, and now she is flying all over the world, according to Yakkurin. Her family had been disappointed that she'd chosen that route after working so hard during her time at the Royal School of Magic, but I think she's making good use of the skills she learned. She can use her familiar to take her anywhere she likes, and with her magic, she'll be able to defend herself against any dangers she encounters. Plus, she's a Lightning-type, so if any creeps try to make a move on her, she'll send them sparking up into the sky.

"I really think there's nothing that can be done about the demons on Steel Mountain but have the Order cast a barrier around it, time-consuming as that will be," I said. "At least one layer around the base."

Zozo nods. "You're right."

I hold out one hand to Yakkurin. "In that case, I'll be sending these request forms and investigation papers over to the Director."

"Please," he says, rolling up the papers and tying them with a string before handing them to me.

"Hey you three, time to switch with the night shift."

"Yes, thank you!"

The senior receptionist in charge of the night shift is urging us to leave. We let her take over the reception area and begin getting ready to go home. I pick up my black overcoat. Going back to the dorm is as simple as walking through the Go-Between in the rear garden, so I'm in no rush to be on my way. If I had to fly all the way home it would take hours, but with the Go-Between I can be at headquarters in no time, and it's only a few minutes walk from there to the dorms.

I wait in front of the Go-Between for Zozo and Yakkurin to finish getting ready.

"You two are only gonna be here for another two days, right?"

"Yeah, but we'll swing by to help out every now and then, so it's all okie-dokie."

"Oh, sweet. Be glad to have your help."

I wave over at them.

"Nanalie, the three of us should go out to eat together tonight!" She pats her belly and laughs. "You wanna come, right, Yakkurin?"

Yakkurin glances over at me and tilts his head. "Whaddya say?"

I have no particular reason to say no, so I nod my head. We just got our paycheck the other day, so it's not like I have to be miserly tonight. "I'm in the mood for it," I say, "especially after the day we just had. But Ms. Zozo, it's not just 'tonight' we're eating out—we're eating out *again* tonight."

"Now even Nanalie's getting sassy with me," she says, half-smiling.

It's only been a little less than nine months since I began working at Harré, but Zozo and I have gotten along well enough that I feel comfortable being more candid around her than I was at the beginning. We often eat together, and while we aren't quite "friends," I'm with her more than I am with my friends. She's my mentor at work, sure, but I also talk with her more than anyone else, and she takes good care of me on the job. I respect her, too. I guess most people would think we were "work friends," but for us it's a little different. Something I can't quite describe.

“I’m sorry!”

I clap one hand over my mouth. *Did I ruin the mood?*

“It’s alright! You’re funnier that way,” she says, laughing, with her hand still on her stomach. *Whew. That’s a relief. I guess if she felt like we always had to be prim and polite with each other, it’d be exhausting for her.*

Yakkurin seems to feel the same. “You spend three years here and you’ll stop caring about all that junior-senior stuff, so it’s no big deal,” he says, trying to get me to relax. He turns to the Go-Between and opens it up. What lies within glimmers brightly.

...Three years, huh. That’s still a long time from now. It’s only half as long as my time back at school, but still.

Following after Yakkurin, Zozo and I both step through the door together, returning home to the north.

* * * *

I slowly lift the geejee on my fork up to my mouth. Sure, bunny-bird is *good*, but meat from three-headed geejee cows is pretty scrumptious as well.

The sharp smell of spices in the air marks out this restaurant as Zozo’s and my usual haunt after work—it’s the Vegetarian Wolf.

Zozo’s basically a regular here. She’d raised her hand and said, “Three mugs of Namus beer, please!” the instant we sat down. She’s sprawled out on the bench like she’s right back at home. I’ve been around her too much, I guess, because I don’t find that strange. I’m not a regular like Zozo is, but I’m getting there—the tavern mistress knows my face. When we’d walked in, she’d said, “Oho, got our paycheck now, did we?” with a knowing smile on her face as she patted my shoulder. *She knows exactly what sort of financial state I’m in whenever I come here. Just what I’d expect from a tavern owner.*

Yakkurin sits down across from me and Zozo, takes a sip of water, then leans forward on his elbows. “You girls got dates for the Flower Goddess Thalia’s festival tomorrow?”

I’m still mid-chew, so it’s Zozo who answers first.

“The festival, right... Well, I do kinda have a date. I’m gonna try ignoring my fortune and seeing how that goes.”

Well, this is a surprise. “You’re going to go against the words of Lady Merakisso?”

“Yeah. But if something bad *does* happen, I’m prepared to follow whatever she predicts for me for the rest of my life.”

Zozo seems pretty intent on going against Lady Fortune’s prediction. *And she believes so strongly in that kind of stuff...! I have no idea who she’s planning on going with, but I bet if I asked her right now, she’d answer me.* I watch Zozo carefully as I munch on another mouthful of geejee meat. She’s got one fist thrust into the air as if to defy the Goddess herself.

Yakkurin seems interested in knowing who her date is as well. “So who is it?”

...He asked, just as I’d expected him to!

Zozo, however, doesn’t seem to be in the mood to tell us. “‘s a secret,” she says, before guzzling down some more beer. *Dammit! I was so close to finding out!*

“Don’t string us along like that, jeez.” Yakkurin shakes his head. “What ’bout you, Hel?”

“I’m going to meet up with a friend after the festival is over.”

I have plans for a rendezvous with Maris. She’d told me to come up to the Royal Isle after the festival, but she hadn’t told me why we had to go *there*. *I’m not a student anymore, and it’s not like I work at the palace or anything—is it even alright for me to set foot on the Isle anymore?*

“And during the festival?”

“Well, I thought about joining my parents and enjoying the festival with them, but when I sent them a letter asking about it, they told me they wanted to just go by themselves. So I suppose I’ll just wander around, seeing whatever’s interesting.”

I’m relieved that my mother and father are back on good terms, but I feel somewhat left out. *Even so, it is the Season of Flowers. They should be free to be*

as lovey-dovey as they like. I don't need to feel bad about not joining them.

“That so? Huh...well why don't we go together, Hel? You and I, to the Flower Goddess's Festival.”

“With you?”

I hadn't considered the possibility of him asking me out. I give him a long, hard look to gauge how serious he is, and to think of my answer. *Nikeh's going to be working, and Benjamine wrote to tell me she'd be going with Satanás.* All of my other friends have dates, or said they'd want to go to the festival on a date, not just “with friends,” so I certainly wasn't about to ask them to come with me.

It's not that I mind going with Yakkurin—I wonder, is he actually fine with going to the festival with me, of all people? Doesn't he have some childhood friend that's his secret lover...?

I glance over at Zozo, the source of that rumor.

“Oh, that rumor about him having a girlfriend? I made it up and then told everyone.”

“What? Why?”

“He was struggling with all the girls asking him on dates! Some of them wouldn't give up with a simple ‘no,’ either, so that's why I decided to help him out. So it's okay, really! Why don't you go together?” She slaps my back in encouragement.

Well, I mean, sure, there aren't many nice young men at Harré, but to think that he had so many women after him that they needed to tell a lie like that...

“We don't have to if you don't wanna. Just, you know, if you don't have anyone else. Whaddaya say?”

“Well...”

I wouldn't mind going to the festival by myself, but I also have no strong reason to turn him down. It'll be my first time going out somewhere with a guy around my own age (Satanás doesn't count), so perhaps it'll be a good experience.

Still, it's a bit risky to go out in public like that when there are rumors floating around that he already has a girlfriend. If we bump into someone from Harré, they'll figure out that he doesn't have a girlfriend—or worse, think that he's cheating on her with me.

I rub my hands together a little as I look back at him.

“Um...are you sure you don't want to ask anyone else?”

“Nah, I'm good. I don't wanna keep lying about that 'girlfriend' anyhow. If someone says something to you about it, I'll get them off your back, so you don't gotta worry 'bout it.”

“Really? Why, in that case, I'd be happy to go with you.”

If he says it's fine, it'll be okay, right? I'll just tell them the truth if asked, and it's not like we're doing anything scandalous. Zozo understands that I don't, or rather, *hate* to lie, so I wasn't too worried that I was being drawn into some scheme of maintaining the story of the fake girlfriend.

“Alright! We are *all* gonna have a blast tomorrow!!”

“It'll be great!”

“You sure are excited, huh, Zozo?”

I suppose I am, too. Tomorrow!

Working at Harré, Part Six

It's the first day of the second month of the Season of Flowers.

A brilliant, sunny day begins in the Kingdom of Doran with the sound of bells praising the founding deity of the realm, Pramána.

There is a bell tower atop the palace on the Royal Isle. Once that bell begins to ring, heralding the rising of the sun, all of Doran slowly wakes from their slumber to greet the new day with joy.

Flowers are blooming everywhere throughout the city. To my left, to my right—all I see are flowers. Flowers, flowers, flowers, fill the town fully up.

Well, perhaps I'm not being descriptive enough here, but it truly does seem like the whole town—the whole country, even—has become one giant field of flowers. Yellow, white, pink, blue, and so many other colors adorn the landscape with every hue of the season.

When I go to the food stalls or into a store to do some shopping, I see workers pushing flowers into their customers' hands. Giving flowers to customers seems to be the shops' way of showing appreciation for their patronage. One of my friends, whose father manages a butcher shop, tells me that they have so many flowers growing around their shop, they give customers a free bouquet with every purchase at this time of year.

While there are many reasons one may receive flowers, I doubt there's a single person who's unhappy with the gift. Flowers are wonderful to get, no matter the reason.

"Sorry for being late! Have you been waiting long?"

I call out to Yakkurin, who's waiting at the spot we decided on. It's not like I'm

actually late—I just feel guilty that he’s been waiting for me to get here.

“Nah, ’s all good! I just got here. It’s still earlier than what we agreed to, yeah?”

His soft, slightly curly, light brown hair shakes a little as he laughs. Fortunately, it doesn’t look like he’s gone out of his way to dress up. He has on a white shirt with a blue vest, and is wearing a modest pair of pants the same light brown as his hair. *Not too showy, not too shabby—for some reason, seeing that makes me feel relaxed, like I did the first time I met Satanás. Although perhaps that’s a bit rude with regards to Yakkurin, because his hair doesn’t look like he’s just rolled out of bed. Anyhow, he looks nice, that’s all.*

Handsome. A cool guy all around, really.

“What’s up?”

Shoot! Yakkurin noticed me staring.

“Um, Hel? You alright there?”

“Oh, sorry about that. I was just thinking that you look really good today, that’s all.”

“Ha! Flattery from the get-go, eh?”

“No, I really mean that. I don’t believe in lying, you know.”

“Zozo did mention that you ‘hated lying’ or something... Jeez, this conversation’s gonna make me blush.”

“Well, let’s just be on our way then!”

I’m wearing what I always do when I’m off work, just a humble little green skirt. I roll up my sleeves a bit and then we’re off, walking through the streets. *Well, I suppose this isn’t what I “always” wear—I just bought these new shoes, and the heels on them are a bit higher than normal. I’d wanted to look just a little fancier than I normally did. Today is the day of the Festival of the Flower Goddess, which only happens once a year, plus I’ve got a date! Who could blame me for wanting to look pretty? Didn’t Mom used to say something like, “good shoes will take you to good places?”* I want to enjoy today as much as possible. I was so excited about the prospect of seeing Maris, I barely slept. *It’s*

embarrassing, but last night I really was acting like a kid the night before a school field trip.

I hope we don't get separated from each other in the crowd. I glance backwards at Yakkurin. "Be careful not to get lost, okay?"

"Yeah," he says, smiling. "Might be a good idea to hold hands, even."

"Hm, you're right."

"What?"

"What? What's wrong?"

"Well, it's just—guess I'm surprised that you're open to it, that's all."

I reach my hand out to him, but he hesitates for some reason. Well, I guess he has a point. We aren't kids or anything, so it would mean something different.

For men and women on the brink of adulthood, walking around town hand in hand was something usually only lovers or married couples did. And yet here I am, stretching out my hand without a care in the world, like we're a couple of kids on a playdate!

The more time that passes, the more embarrassed I get. I feel my cheeks start to flush.

"Anyways, setting that aside—if you're alright with it, I really would like to hold hands."

"But—"

"Don't get lost on me now!"

Yakkurin grabs my hand and pulls me forward. I keep my eyes focused on his back as we move through the crowd, hand in hand.

I didn't make him feel like we had to hold hands...did I? I feel a bit guilty about how things turned out. We're not boyfriend and girlfriend or anything, and if someone who likes him sees this, there's sure to be a misunderstanding. Plus, all the Harré employees have the day off today, so the likelihood that we'll run into someone we know is rather high. Maybe he was right to hesitate—we'll just cause more confusion about his relationship status, which can't be fun for him

to think about.

“Um, I’m sorry bu—”

“Let go of my hand and I’ll fine ya three pegalo!”

He has a big smile on his face as he says this to me over his shoulder.

He really, truly is a “nice guy,” isn’t he?

The streetlights we pass by on our way are still unlit. There are a lot of brick buildings in this part of town. The flowers look even more beautiful against the red of the brick, growing all along the edges of the road. A little ways further, the road narrows to a stone staircase, which leads up into a park where, around the white fountain of the Goddess, a band is playing, people are dancing, children are wearing flower crowns, and lovers are kissing each other as they exchange flowers.

Right now, it all appears to me as the most wonderful, radiant sight in the world.

Then, all of those people who had been so involved in their dancing, or confessions, or flower crowns—all of them begin to chatter excitedly as they look up at the sky.

I follow their gazes and I can see that right now, the royal family is descending in its pegasi-drawn carriage. The carriage, large and glowing as gold as the sun, flies directly overhead.

“Glory to the Kingdom of Doran!”

“Glory!”

“Long live the King!”

“Long live the Queen!”

Everyone takes out a small handkerchief-sized Doran flag, lifts it up, and begins waving it in the air. From the sky, from the carriage, flower petals float down to shower the city. The people cheer with joy, and raise their hands to grab the petals.

Just as I’m about to grab one of the petals, however, a bouquet of flowers

suddenly appears beside me.

“For you,” Yakkurin says.

“Really? Thank you so much.”

“My pleasure,” he says, smiling. He looks over in the direction of the Harré headquarters. “Wish the Director and Alkes could’ve gotten the day off as well too, though.”

He says this right in the middle of us enjoying the festival. I turn towards Harré as well and give a short, sincere bow of gratitude to both the Director and Mr. Alkes. I said earlier that “all” of the Harré employees have the day off today, but they’re on standby at the headquarters anyway, just in case anything happens. They do this every year, apparently, and even if we employees volunteer to do it instead, the Director turns us down. Ms. Harris had proposed switching out with the Director for a mere half day so that she could go out and have some fun, but she’d firmly refused, shaking her head and saying, “This is my duty as the Director of Harré.”

Ms. Harris and Zozo, of course, had muttered a few complaints about how it was their duties as employees to cover for the Director, but it was no use.

I hadn’t been working long enough to feel comfortable saying anything like that, obviously, but the Director, who’s been at work on every Flower Festival since she got the position—I just felt sad for her, to be honest, and wanted to offer my help as well. *She may get teased a lot by the other employees about being single, but I think we’re all actually rather worried about that.*

Mr. Alkes, of course, insisted on staying with her. For some reason, no one volunteered to cover for him. Instead, they’d said, “Please, take good care of our lovelorn Director!” and patted him on the back on their way out.

You know, I think it’d be nice to buy them a little something as a souvenir. I’m going to head back to the dorm before I go up to meet Maris, so I’ll try giving it to them then.

“Knights are workin’ too, aren’t they?”

“They have to guard the royal family. One of my friends is a Knight, you know, and she’s one of those working today.”

There are Knights standing at regular intervals throughout every city in the Kingdom today. With all of the citizens out and about in a festive mood while the royal family is flying over the whole Kingdom, they have to be on a strict lookout for any trouble. It'd take too long to mobilize them should anything happen, so they're stationed everywhere to prevent problems in the first place.

Doran's people are friendly, though, so they give them flowers, and some of the children even crown the lady Knights with their flower crowns. I see one such Knight getting crowned right now, and she looks very happy. *"Peace"—a word that's meant to describe a day like today.*

"Oh, right—you feelin' hungry?"

"Kinda... What sort of things do you like to eat?"

"Me? Sweet and spicy geejee's my favorite, I guess."

"Oh...I think I remember Kara liking not just geejee meat, but sweet and spicy stuff in general, right? Siblings really do resemble each other."

"Well what about you, Hel? Got any brothers or sisters?"

"I have this cousin who's like my older brother, but other than that, no, I'm an only child."

As we walk down the street, I see sorcerers I've met at work, the old lady who I buy groceries from, and some repeat clients as well. I wave to them, say hello, and we continue walking, sometimes eating food from a stall as we go.

Yakkurin sees some acquaintances and friends of his as well, and he calls out to all of them with a smile—while still holding my hand. *I suppose he really doesn't mind people seeing us like this.* He doesn't try to let go when he sees his friends, and when sorcerers I know or the old lady from the grocery try teasing us about the hand-holding, he just smiles and says, "I'm holding her hand so she doesn't get lost." I attempt to explain, of course, that I was holding *his* hand so he wouldn't get lost—but whenever I say that, for some reason, everyone would look sorry, pat his back, and then say to him, "Sorry, dear" or "That's rough, bro," and then "Good luck." I'm a little puzzled as to what they're thinking when they say this.

Maybe they just pity him because they think he's babysitting a grown woman

at the festival...?

* * * *

“Hel, your clothes are covered with flowers.”

Yakkurin points down at my skirt, laughing with a kind smile that reaches his eyes.

We’ve been walking along, buying this and that from the stalls, and I see that at some point, my clothes have indeed become covered with flowers. *The shopkeepers gave me so many!* Even though I tried to tell them I couldn’t hold any more, they’d press them into my hair, my collar, and even into my belt loops. *I feel like I’ve become a flower vase. Not an experience I’d thought I’d ever have, that’s for sure.* For the past six years, I’d been living in a dorm up on the Isle, and hadn’t had the chance to enjoy the festival like this. *Even before then, it had been different. I remember going with my parents, but I hadn’t known that festival day was when the very world bloomed to life.* I look up at the clear sky. *Blue, far as the eye can see.*

“Whoa, Nanalie? That you?”

“Oh! Benjamine!”

Yakkurin and I are walking side by side when someone calls out to me from behind. I turn around to see Benjamine wearing a flower crown, holding a snack in one hand. She looks like she’s having fun.

Yakkurin and I haven’t been holding hands for a little while, as we’ve been too busy carrying all the food we’ve been buying. “Looks like we’re both having fun,” I say.

“Who’s the guy you’re with?” she asks, nodding to Yakkurin. I tell her he’s just a friend from work. Then I realize there’s something I need to ask:

“Where’s Satanás? Weren’t you two coming together?”

“Well, yeah, we came together, but...look over there.” She juts her chin out to my right.

“Hey girllll! I got the ‘spirit of the flowers’ in me, if you know what I mean. Whaddya say, gimme a chance?” Satanás is calling to a woman passing by.

“Hmm? Whereabouts do you keep that ‘spirit of the flowers’?”

“Right down here.”

“Oh, my goodness, that’s *quite* something!”

Unbelievable.

A dark shadow passes over my face, like that of a murderer. “Pardon me. I’ve got an insect to crush.”

“Wa-Wait up!”

Benjamin panics and tries to stop me.

Inexcusable! What the hell is he thinking? Did he grow flowers inside his brain, too? I feel like branding the word “IDIOT” right across his forehead.

Benjamin’s holding me back by gripping my arm. “He acts like that, but he makes sure that all the men who try to come after me are sent packing.”

“Is that true?”

“Yeah. He’s even promised me we’ll go up to the Flower Garden’s Tower later.”

The Flower Tower. The word “tower” does, of course, call to mind an image of some solitary structure, but the Flower Tower is actually filled on a daily basis with people declaring their eternal love for each other—in other words, it’s one of the main places people get married in Doran. The “Tower” isn’t the entirety of the structure, however—that’s only a part of it. As a whole, the complex is referred to as the “Verakkano,” and it’s one of the largest buildings in the Kingdom. Some people have their weddings at shrines, but most citizens of Doran marry at Verakkano.

Today, with most people off work (except everyone working the stalls), and Verakkano open to the general public (just for the day of the festival), there’s a lot of people going in and out of the building, but no marriage ceremonies.

The building is called “the Flower Tower” because, obviously, of the *literal* tower of flowers sprouting from the top of it—or at least, they look like a tower. It looks like one great, twisted bunch of giant vines growing up into the sky, and on the vines grow thousands and thousands of flowers, making it look like a

man-made tower has, indeed, suddenly become one giant flower. In the Season of Distant Skies, they are all just green buds, unfortunately, but right now's the peak of the flowering season, so they're quite a sight to see.

The vast majority of the people heading up to the Flower Tower are lovers or married couples going there to exchange flowers. Around the tower spirals a staircase that one can climb all the way up to the top. All the couples say that it's the absolute best place to exchange flowers in the whole Kingdom.

Even from here I can tell there's a real crowd going up and down those steps today. *With that many people, it wouldn't surprise me if people got pushed off the top by accident. I pray that doesn't happen.*

Back to Benjamine. "Yeah, I just kind of think of that as an illness at this point. He's been saying that he's 'weak for older ladies with big boobs' forever. But still, he's here with me, kind of, so I don't mind too much. I like that side of him too, I guess."

Benjamine seems to have come to terms with the kind of person Satanás is. *She would've been brought to tears before, seeing him like this. Or brought the Hammer of Rage down upon his womanizing head. Wait...they still aren't formally dating, are they? How long do they intend to continue this kind of relationship? I'm not one to comment on other people's love lives, but I do wish she'd ask me for help when he's giving her this kind of trouble.*

And even if she doesn't ask—

"SATANÁSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSS!!"

"And then, you could...uh, huh?"

"I'M GONNA GIVE YOUR PHILANDERING ASS THE BLACKEST FLOWER IN THE WHOLE KINGDOM!"

I create a dark, black flower of ice with my magic and send it flying with a *kick* right at the face of that unforgivably disloyal lout.

"Why'd *you* have to be here, Nanalie!! Shit!"

"I'm coming for you, you horny devil!"

There's a lot else I'd like to say—but Benjamine seems to find that one

particularly funny, so I leave it at that. *After all, I did land a direct hit with that flower to the face.* He's rubbing his face in pain. "There," I say, nodding to myself in satisfaction. "All better."

He scowls back at me and yells, "I don't feel any better at all!!"

* * * *

The red couplet flowers are the royal flowers of Doran.

Each and every petal is large, flutters gently in the wind, and is as beautiful as the dress of a princess.

Just because it's the royal flower, however, doesn't mean it grows everywhere: they only bloom on the Royal Isle itself. You can only buy couplet flowers at the florist's shop, and they're quite popular, so they're often out of stock.

On top of that, couplet flowers are said to be "the" variety to give to your lover during the flower festival. *That must be the reason why there are even fewer to go around than usual right now.* There are several types of flowers that can't be grown using Earth magic, and the couplet is one of those varieties.

So it's not that easy to just simply grow more whenever you want them.

"Wow, you were able to find some."

"Guess I got lucky. This was the last bouquet left at the store."

I'm brushing my face up against the petals of the flowers as I stand next to Yakkurin, trying to get a good whiff of their perfume. The dull pain in my feet, however, makes me crease my forehead in discomfort. *I shouldn't have come wearing brand new shoes. My heels and toes hurt in kind of a strange way. It feels like they're chafing. Skin is definitely peeling off if they feel this bad.*

Maybe we shouldn't have gone searching every store for couplet flowers after we split up with Benjamine.

Normally, I'd be able to fix this sort of issue with a quick healing spell, but that would require stopping at the side of the street for a moment and taking off my shoes. My skin wouldn't regenerate unless I directly touched the chafed area.

Of course, if I tell Yakkurin that my feet are hurting, he'll feel bad, and I don't

want that to happen. I guess I'll just claim I need to go to the bathroom to get away from him for a moment.

"Oh, sorry!"

As I'm looking down at my feet, a woman bumps my shoulder as she passes me by. She must be in a hurry, because right after she apologizes to me, she continues dashing forward along the road.

We continue walking and after about twenty paces we see a crowd has formed in the middle of the street. *Street performers would be showing off their acts here, in the middle of a busy road.* I see the woman who bumped into me moments ago disappear into that same crowd. *What in the world could she be after...?*

Yakkurin looks over at me. "What's up?"

"Well, it doesn't look like that's a performer over there..."

Yakkurin squints, watching the crowd.

"Um, Yakkurin...?"

Setting aside the matter of the crowd in front of us, I really need to "get to a bathroom." *These shoes are killing me. Since flying is forbidden today, I'll just have him wait for me in front of a store or something.*

I tap his arm as I try to get his attention. "I, uh..."

"Wow, now even Hel has someone who she's having secret dates with, huh?"

"Wha—*blerg!!*"

Right as we're passing by the noisy crowd, I hear a certain man's voice over the excited chatter of the throng. It's not like I have particularly good ears or anything—just normal hearing, really—but when it comes to a *certain individual* (an especially unlikable fellow), my body viscerally reacts as it tries to expel the very sound of his voice from my ears. *If a hundred people were lined up, started speaking to me all at once, and he was in the crowd—I'd know.*

"Sir Alois!"

"Sir Rockmann, please, take some of these flowers, would you?"

“Thanks, but I’m on duty right now, so I’ll grab them later. But I’ll happily take these flowers from this little lady. Whaddaya say?”

“Hooray! Sir Knight-man, here’s your floooowers!”

He’d been buried in the affections of his onlookers, so I hadn’t noticed it at first, but now I can clearly see the head of a tall man sticking out over the crowd. He’d been bent over, so I hadn’t been able to see him before. He stares at me with an unbelievably rude look in his eyes, as if he’s just caught a glimpse of some rare beast in the wild. *The expression he’s making with his face and that kind petting thing he’s doing to that little girl’s hair don’t seem like they’re being done by the same person.*

“Blergh!” I see him frowning in disgust at my antics before I look away. In the direction opposite of Yakkurin, of course—don’t want to get any vomit on him.

Why’s he here?

“Mind if you stop making those barfing noises? It’s gonna make me embarrassed if you go on like that.”

He motions for the women standing between us to move aside so he can walk right up to where Yakkurin and I are standing. I frown right back at him.

How rude! If he’s going to feel embarrassed when he talks to me, he shouldn’t have called out to me in the first place. “Hmph!” I snort in irritation.

“All you gotta do is just give me a normal answer—”

“No, all *you* have to do is not call out to me like that—”

And so we begin talking. I can tell there’s going to be no end to this line of discussion so I say “Enough!” and make a big X in the air between us with my arms.

“It really is like Brunel said.” Rockmann glances at my head. “Your hair sticks out so much, I can’t help but notice it. No need to worry about you getting lost, right?”

Rockmann’s taking a careful look at me from top to bottom, noting all the flowers stuck to various parts of my outfit. *Did he sound impressed right now? Talking about my hair, of all things?*

“Oh, shut up,” I say. “Aren’t you supposed to be working? What could you *pos-si-bly want with me?*”

I ignore the pain in my feet as I stamp one foot firmly on the ground.

“Well, I was just surprised to see Rigel Yakkurin walking around with a woman, and then I see it’s *you*.”

“Haven’t seen you in a while, Captain. Been alright?”

“Well you’ve been pretty busy out in the field, right? No chance to chat when I come into the Soreiyu office for meetings.”

Whoa, hold on a second...are they...acting friendly with each other?

“Doesn’t look like the Order’s got a chance to relax today, right? That’s nothing new, I suppose. Sorry for bothering you on your patrol.”

“No, it’s completely fine—I was the one who called out to you, after all. Enjoy the day. Festival’s only once a year, after all.”

Ugh, with that friendly tone he’s taking with Yakkurin right now, I feel like I’ve lost in some competition of who-has-the-better-relationship-with-Yakkurin. And I’ve lost to Rockmann, of course. I shouldn’t feel this down about the situation. The Soreiyu District is patrolled mainly by the First Platoon, and Rockmann has periodic meetings at the Harré office there, so of course he met Yakkurin before I worked there.

Even so, based on how they’re talking with each other, I can’t quite tell how they think their differences in age and rank affect their relationship. Rockmann doesn’t *sound* like he’s talking down to Yakkurin, but more like they’re on equal standing. I’m not saying this very well, but he’s casual enough that I could believe they’re friends. Yakkurin doesn’t seem put off by this, in fact, and he seems just as happy to speak casually. I focus my gaze on a point in the air between the two, trying to figure out what the dynamic here is.

“Anyhow, those are some pretty good shoes you’ve got on...did ya steal them?”

I know he’s asking *me* that insane question. He’s only ever that rude when he’s talking to me.

“I bought them! Brand new!! Stop saying stuff that makes me sound like a kleptomaniac!!”

“Hmm, really? Lemme take a look.” Leaning his chin on one hand, he crouches down to get closer to my feet. *He’s infuriatingly observant. Are they so obviously new to him?*

He brushes one of the edges of my shoes with his fingers. “Got them from Amalfi’s, I think...”

Guessed right on the first try! Ugh!

The goods they sell there are a bit pricey, and despite the fact that I’ve been going on about how I “need to budget” because I “don’t have much money,” I’d given in and bought them anyway. Some of the aristocrats do their shopping there, it seems, but all I’d wanted was a pair of new, not secondhand, shoes that were tailored to fit my feet. *Aristocrats may buy from the same store, but they’re certainly paying for better quality than these.*

I was surprised that Rockmann guessed it on the first try. Before I ask how he knew, however, now that Rockmann’s body isn’t blocking my view, I can see that some of the women around us are staring. I can see the same question in all of their eyes: “*Who’s that?*”

The pretty ladies holding their bouquets of flowers who are looking at me right now don’t have that sharp gleam of jealousy in their eyes that the girls back at school had always glared at me with—they look genuinely confused as their gazes dart between Yakkurin and me. Their expressions are downcast, worried.

I overhear one of the closest women nod at me and Yakkurin and say to the woman next to her, “Those two are *definitely* together, right? Sir Rockmann just seems like a friend.”

“Oh good,” the other woman says, not even trying to hide her relief.

Hello? I’m standing right here, thank you! Do you have to say it like that? I sigh. *Makes sense, though. They’re worried because Rockmann’s talking with me. Jeez, this guy makes me out to be the villain every time he shows up.* The well-fitted black Knight’s uniform looks good on him, like he wore it just so

women would praise him in the streets as he walked by. *Even I'm not going to claim it looks bad.*

I heard from Ms. Bell the other day that there were pictures of good-looking male Knights being sold at certain markets, Rockmann's picture included. I have no idea whether this is something the Order has approved or not, but it's clear that women really like the title of "Knight" when it comes to choosing lovers.

Rockmann is still looking at my feet.

"Don't you think that's enough?" I lift my foot a little to get him to back away. He immediately stands up and retreats to a safe distance to avoid being kicked, then claps his hands together like he's shaking dust off them.

"Anyway, you gotta be careful not to crush them to bits, okay?"

"I'll have you know that I take such good care of my belongings that I'm known as 'Well-Used Nanalie.' Don't make fun of me."

"Are you sure they're referring to the way you care for your belongings when they call you 'Well-Used'? Do you honestly think you're being complimented with that?" He holds one hand over his mouth and tries to stifle a laugh. "I should bid you *well wishes* for the recovery of that *well-used* brain of yours." His hair catches the sun, and right then it looks perfectly golden in the afternoon light, shining like its own constellation of stars.

There's a crowd around us at the moment so I can't, but I'd very much like to punch this idiot. My fists are trembling with anger as I hold myself back.

One day I will find your weakness, and I will expose it to the world.

Yakkurin points at the pink flowers Rockmann's holding in his hands.

"Someone give you those?"

"Oh, yeah, a little lady gave them to me. But look at you—are those couplet flowers you've got there?"

"Yeah. I saw that all the Knights have couplet flowers decorating the breast pockets on their uniforms today."

"By the grace of His Highness, yes, we do."

“By the grace of His Highness?”

I tilt my head to one side. Rockmann ignores my unspoken question and turns around, saying that he has to get going to the next stop on his patrol.

“Try to enjoy Flower Season,” he says as he walks away.

All he had to say was “enjoy!” I don’t need that “try to” garbage! What a nasty guy. Childish as it is, I stick my tongue out at his receding backside. Yakkurin forces a smile as he sees me do this, then encourages me to follow him farther along the street. “Right,” I say, feeling stupid for having made such a stupid spectacle in front of him. I set aside my annoyance at Rockmann, get back into the festival mood, and take one big step towards Yakkurin as he begins moving again.

“Huh?”

It’s at that moment that I notice that, for some reason, all of the pain in my feet is gone.

The day turns to dusk, and the sun begins to set.

A scarlet veil of light falls over the Flower Tower. I’m sure that right now, all those lovers at the top are completely caught up in the magic of the moment.

The royal family has been flying over the Kingdom since early this morning. They’ll be returning to their castle in the sky soon enough.

Their subjects, on the other hand, will likely go on reveling into the night. There’s no sign of the festivities winding down any time soon. Customers are just now beginning to make their way into the taverns, where they’ll drink the night away.

I’ve got some plans myself. Maris will be waiting for me to arrive up on the Royal Isle.

Oh, that’s right—back when I went to check on how the Director was doing at Harré earlier, wasn’t Zozo at the reception desks along with her and Mr. Alkes? I’d been quite surprised to see her there. That was right after I disentangled myself from another chance encounter with Rockmann, so it was right in the middle of the day.

The sight of the three of them sitting there, all yawning, had been so overwhelmingly dull that it nearly made me forget that today was the Festival of the Flower Goddess.

Zozo had something like an aura of negligence about her as I asked, “Oh, Zozo? Weren’t you going to go against Lady Merakisso’s fortune and—” She clapped her hand over my mouth and dragged me into a corner before I could say anything further.

“Shhh! Quiet, you!” she whispered in my ear. “You didn’t come all the way here just so that I could crush you into little pieces of gravel now, did you?”

“Ah, no ma’am.”

She’d gripped my shoulders rather tightly. Painfully so.

After I gave them souvenirs from the festival outside—the flower crowns and the food—the Director apparently decided it was her turn to take me aside for a whispered conversation. I was concerned that my shoulders were about to be pinched again, so I covered both of them with my hands as I listened to what she had to say.

“I wonder—is it really alright for me to be here?”

“Director, why would you think something like that?”

“Well, I mean, no matter how you look at it, I’m that in this situation!”

“‘That’?”

“...Oh, never mind. It’s nothing, right? I’m too old to be thinking like a schoolgirl anymore about these sorts of things.”

Following that rather bizarre conversation with the Director, Yakkurin and I left the building. The three of them seemed to be completely unoccupied with any real business whatsoever, because as we were heading out the door, I saw them pulling out board games from underneath the reception counters. (Even I couldn’t help but laugh at that.) Yakkurin seemed to notice what they were doing as well. “Ahh,” he said under his breath, “we should’ve brought them toys, not food.”

One day, I will be a good enough receptionist that the Director will rely on me

to take her place and watch over Harré on off-shifts like this.

The streetlamps outside had just begun to glow with their warm light. They looked as if they had captured some of that soft brilliance of the setting sun in the space between their glassy panes, flickering and twinkling from time to time. Fire mages had made them, so it wasn't too surprising to see that, upon closer examination, there really were small flames burning inside them. The dark brown of the lampposts matched the brickwork of the surrounding buildings perfectly, and the sight of them lighting up the town at night warmed the soul.

I look at Yakkurin. "Thanks for today, I had fun. Will you be meeting up with your friends now?"

"Yeah, I promised some of the guys I met earlier that I'd have a drink with them. Though I doubt it's gonna end at just one drink."

He gestures as though he's holding a glass and knocks it back, gulping down the imaginary beer.

"Well, that sounds fun, doesn't it?"

"You're gonna see your friend, right?"

"Yes, but I imagine she'll be a bit stronger than what you'll be drinking."

"Stronger'?"

"Anyway, I was thinking of giving this flower to her."

I glance down at the red flower in my hands and think of Maris.

Her hair is that same sort of flaming red, isn't it? Though I suppose if we want to be technical, it's auburn, but still, a very pretty color.

"Yeah? ...Well, then I'll give you this one, so you can have one for yourself."

Yakkurin takes the flower he has in his hand and holds it out to me.

I focus my gaze on it as it comes closer.

"For me?"

"I already sent some to my mom and dad the other day, and there's no point in giving it to one of my guy friends, right?"

Aren't we just "friends," though? Today's our first time out together, and I don't feel as though we have the sort of relationship where he should feel obliged to give me this lovely couplet flower we searched so long for.

I slowly shake my head. "We worked so hard to find these," I say. "I can't take that one from you."

Yakkurin isn't about to give up that easily. He gently takes my hand and presses the flower into my palm, and then wraps my fingers around its smooth, slender stem.

I stare down at my hands, each holding one red flower.

"There were two left at that store, so I figured I'd buy one as well," he says, blushing a bit. "But it's for you. No takebacks," he adds.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah."

"Well, thank you very much." I say, nodding my head and smiling down at the two flowers. *I'll send him something nice in a few days, to show him I really am grateful for this.*

And with that, Yakkurin and I go our separate ways into the night.

* * * *

Once the royal family has returned home to the Isle, the restriction on flying is lifted. I'm heading up there myself right now on Lala's back.

"Do you think it'll be alright if I show up looking like this?"

"Miss Nanalie, you look good no matter what you wear."

"Wow, you really think so? Wait, that's not what I'm trying to say..."

I'd gone back to the dorm and changed before we set out for the Isle, but now I'm getting nervous about my outfit again.

I know where we're supposed to meet, but I'm not sure what we'll be doing once we get there. I've come wearing my best clothes, but still... After Benjamine, Maris usually has the most to say when it comes to clothes, and I'd rather leave her as little room to complain as possible. I'm not so much of an

idiot that I've come wearing my pajamas—this will be my first time meeting her in a while, after all—I'm wearing the best casual wear I have. *Still, will this be good enough? Sure, friends are supposed to accept you “as you are,” but if I showed up in commoner rags to a fancy aristocratic shindig, I doubt Maris would be happy about it.*

Before we took off, I shrunk the couplet flower I'm intending to give to Maris down to the size of my pinky and slipped it inside the locket hanging by a chain around my neck, nice and safe. It's a pretty necklace, but perhaps a bit old-fashioned. It looks classy rather than cheap, however, and that's what matters for tonight. My mother gave it to me, and it's useful for carrying things around when I want to keep my hands free.

Couplet flowers, like most other flowers, can have their size changed with magic, but the permanent cantaré types of spells don't work on them. Invisibility and summoning spells don't work on them either. On top of that, Earth mages can't grow them. Perhaps it's because they can't be *made* that the meanings associated with the flower—“true love,” “an honest life,” “purity”—all speak to the truth that there is nothing artificial about them. They possess a beauty that cannot be altered or created with an illusion of magic.

It's for those very meanings that people often give them to someone of the opposite sex. *I, however, intend on giving this one to Maris with the meaning of “true friendship.”*

“That's it, isn't it?”

As we approach the Isle, I can see that the landing area where we arranged to meet is filled with horse-drawn carriages. I pull the hood down further over my head to block out the wind as I try to get a better look.

“Lady Nanalie, you are to meet Lady Maris there, are you not?”

“Yeah...but there's something about this whole scene that reminds me of something.”

Is it the gathering of aristocrats, with their varied carriages stopped somewhere atop the Isle, attended by crowds of servants that is triggering my memory? From what I can see, based just on how everyone looks, no one is wearing costumes tonight, and there are also no commoners among them.

Of course, visiting the Isle is a privilege reserved for the few, and besides the students and teachers commuting to the school, only aristocrats are allowed here, generally speaking.

“Are you referring to the carriages?”

“On that day when I went to that disaster of a masquerade—there were a lot of carriages stopped near the palace steps. This looks a lot like that, is all.” I’m half-mumbling to myself as I describe what I’m feeling to Lala. *I don’t see Maris anywhere. I suppose I’ll have a better chance to find her after I land.*

There are several other people who’ve also arrived on familiars, and once they land, they immediately blend into the crowd of other aristocrats. *At least, I’m assuming they’re also aristocrats. But maybe they aren’t.*

I feel a sort of kinship with the others who are arriving on familiars. They’re wearing much fancier clothes than I am, and some of the ladies are wearing pretty dresses, even though they’re riding on the backs of familiars—but still, there’s something about them that feels more like *me* than like the people arriving in the carriages. *I wonder why.*

As I descend towards the landing site, I’m guided by a Knight mounted on a pegasus. It’s unusual to see Knights patrolling the skies around the Isle.

“My lady, pardon me,” he says once we’ve both got our feet on the ground. *Ah, here it comes. He wants my identification papers now.* “Would you mind showing me your Visitation Permission and telling me who might be the Noble Guarantor for your visit?” His Knight’s uniform is pure white, the color of the palace guards.

I straighten up my posture a bit and roll up my sleeves before I respond. “Um, I was asked to come here by one of my noble friends—is there an event or something going on today?”

It’s impossible for me to relax, despite having reached my destination. *Am I just another party-crasher, in this guard’s eyes...?* I crane my neck as I search for Maris, feeling nervous about the whole affair.

The guard sees my shoulders droop in anxiety, gives me a friendly smile, and politely answers my question.

“Tonight, with the hopes of celebrating another year of prosperity in the Kingdom, all of Doran’s aristocracy is gathering to hold a banquet and ball. High-ranking nobles have been granted the special privilege of inviting a commoner guest, if they so wish—are you perhaps engaged to meet such an aristocrat tonight?”

Well, it looks like I’m not going to be treated like an intruder, so that’s a relief. The chivalrous Knight takes out a small notebook from his breast pocket to ascertain which aristocrat I’m acquainted with.

“Ah, my friend is Maris Hestia Lovegol Caromines, daughter of Marquess Caromines.”

Should I have told him that? Will Maris be irritated at me if I go around using her name to get around the guards?

“Well now, a friend of Marquess Caromines’ daughter, are you? My apologies for the intrusion, but would you mind removing your hood?”

“Of course, sir.”

I pull back the hood on my cloak. I can feel that my hair has turned into a staticky mess from rubbing up against the fabric of the hood, and I run my fingers through it to smooth it down.

“Thank you, my lady. If you wouldn’t mind also telling me your name...?”

“My name is Nanalie Hel.”

“I see. Now then Ms. Hel, wait here a moment, please.”

I give him a courteous nod of assent and wait as he requests, while he moves towards the crowd. Just moments later I hear a familiar voice.

“Nanalie! You made it!”

“Maris!”

The Knight had brought Maris to me—or rather, she had accompanied the Knight back to where I was waiting.

Upon seeing me, she holds up the hem of her dress a little and hurries over. “Hooray!” she says as I begin to run towards her as well, holding out my arms to

embrace her—but the moment before I can do so, her fan whacks my head and I fall to the ground with a shrieking halt.

What the hell just happened?

“Hey, Maris, what do you think you’re doing??”

“You were coming in too fast, so I did you the favor of stopping you before you swerved off course! O-ho-ho-ho, you’ll forgive me, won’t you?”

I glare up at her from my position on the ground.

“Whatever. The guard just told me there’s a banquet going on tonight here—what’s that all about?”

“Dearie, you never have anything scandalous to write about in your letters, yes? And an opportunity like this doesn’t come around very often, you know? I thought we might go to the banquet together and have ourselves a bit of a *scandalous* evening, hmmm?”

“What’s got you thinking about stuff like *that*? Aren’t normal, *completely normal* letters good enough?!”

“Oh no, my dear, not good enough at all! We’re best friends, after all, are we not?”

She’s as forceful as ever in her opinions (about me, especially), but the way she’s talking seems a bit more grown-up than when we last met. *She’s always been mature for her age, but perhaps the tone she’s taking tonight is due to all the aristocrats around her.* Despite the darkening dusk skies, she looks positively radiant tonight.

“Well, when you put it that way, it’s kinda hard to say no.” I heave myself off the ground and fuss with my outfit and hair, trying to look presentable. As I massage my poor red forehead, I give Maris a good look from head to toe.

She folds her arms. “Is there perhaps something on my face?”

“No, not at all.”

Of course she came wearing red tonight. The dress she has on right now is the deepest crimson, with frilly black lace adorning the sleeves. Merely seeing this level of *class* makes me want to fall on my hands and knees before her queenly

getup. *It's overbearing—well, intense, at least.* She's got her beautiful red hair in a tight bun, bound by a decorative silver hair clasp in the shape of rapiakta flower petals that twist and twirl their way down to rest on either side of her head.

Against her porcelain-white skin, the piercing ruby red of her eyes and softer cherry red of the lipstick on her thick, soft lips stand out quite sharply.

I always thought she looked like a little doll, but I must confess that it's a bit frightening that she's maintained that image into adulthood.

As she turns towards the party happening around us, the silky folds of her long dress whirl in turn; she looks every bit like a young lady or bride-to-be wearing a soft cloak to hide her pale skin.

I look away from the dress and back up at her face.

"Maris, you're...really pretty."

"...I think one of the reasons I enjoy being around you, dear, is the fact that I am able to believe such compliments from you are sincere."

"Oh, is that why?" I bring my hands up against my cheeks and laugh in that high-pitched manner Maris always does. "O-ho-ho-ho!"

"You stop that right now, dearie!" She gives me another whack on the forehead with her fan, but it doesn't hurt in the least.

The red road that leads up to the palace is lined with aristocrats making their way along it in a leisurely fashion. Partway along the road, it splits in two: the right way leading to the Royal School of Magic, the left leading to where the royal family of Doran resides, the pure white palace of Shuzelk.

Tonight, of course, we head left towards Castle Shuzelk along with everyone else. Maris is walking beside me.

"How fares your work, dear?"

"How do you mean?"

"Why, are you steadily progressing in your pursuit of your dream?"

We talk about this and that as we walk along. Maris came tonight with her family, but her parents went along ahead to the palace before I arrived. Apparently she'd waited for me at the landing site with a servant. This has nothing to do with what we're talking about now, but the servant was quite beautiful, exactly the type of woman I'd expect to be working for the Caromines.

"Hmmm, kinda, I guess. Still only halfway there, you know? It'll take years to become like the Director...but I do my best, every day. How about you, Maris?"

"To what do you refer?"

"You know, your family stuff. You're going to be Marquise one day, right?"

Maris is the only child of her parents, Marquess Caromines and his lady wife. She's written a bit about her life at home in her letters to me.

"Well, as a girl I followed my father around and observed his work up close, but now I help him as well. Also, of course, I didn't mention this in my letters, but I'm an attendant for Her Majesty the Queen now as well."

"The Queen?!"

By *"the Queen"* she means "the Queen," right?

"Only once every three days, though. It's a role different from that of a servant. I was honored to be named to the position by the King himself. Normally a Duchess would be nominated for such a role, but there aren't any young Duchesses right now. Sir Alois's mother, and Lady Norweira as well, assist from time to time, but of course *she* is with child now, so we can't ask too much from her. I have to do all I can."

"Rockmann's mother is pregnant?"

"Yes, we discovered it was so around the end of the Season of Light, so she's not quite showing yet."

He is eighteen years old, just like me. Plus, I've heard he has an older brother. I'd not heard one word about his brother back at school, so he must have been at least six years older. Even if we suppose that his mother had her first child when she was fifteen years old, she must be around forty right now.

“Ah, if only I were able to meet a man who would show me such love, no matter how old I became. It’s wonderful, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, amazing.”

I’d also like a little brother or sister who’s eighteen years younger than me. I bet I’d take great care of them. Were I to express that to my mom, though, I’m sure she’d yell at me to “get pregnant myself!” and that would be the end of the conversation.

“In order to become the attendant of the Queen, does your family have to hold the rank of either Duke or Marquess?”

“Yes, and when it came time to select from the Marquess-rank families, I was the one chosen. An honor, of course, to be able to observe the Queen so intimately, and learn so much from her. And then...”

“And then?”

“Well, Sir Alois spends less of his time at his father the Duke’s residence, and more time at the Knight’s lodge up here on the Isle. We pass each other from time to time as we go through our days, you know. It’s practically Elysium up here for me!”

She’s very excited as she tells me this. Seeing him must really make her happy.

When I’d heard she was corresponding with him, I’d found it odd that his replies reached her so quickly every time.

“You said that you were writing him one letter every three days, and I guess now that makes sense.”

“Oh, indeed! On occasion, he delivers his replies to me in person, wouldn’t you know?”

She’s the picture of happiness as she says this.

No matter how long our conversations, I never feel like we have enough time to talk about everything. Even if a moment of silence stretched out into a longer pause in the conversation, it never got awkward. Neither of us think that not speaking is a “bad” thing, anyhow.

Besides, silence itself can allow for a great conversation. It’s not that we’re

such good friends that we never run out of things to talk about—even if we do stop talking, we take casual glimpses at the other’s face, laugh for no reason, and look up at the sky just because. That’s what good friends we are.

“Come on over here, will you?”

As we enter the palace grounds, the red clay road changes to an avenue paved with white brick. Maris pulls me aside, along the path that leads to the garden.

Small trees grow here and there, and beyond waves of green grass lies a large pond...or perhaps it would be better called a lake. The entire garden is immaculately manicured, like some perfect green labyrinth, with brilliant and extravagant fountains placed here and there. *It’s like I’ve fallen into a painting.*

The last time I’d come to the palace, there hadn’t been much time to take a good look at the surrounding area, but now I can see that it is absolutely *stunning*. The palace itself is even more amazing, of course, but this garden is so massive that hundreds of houses could fit inside it.

My father, who’s apparently developed something of a potbelly as of late, could do with a run around this garden. *Just one lap, Dad. Then you’ll be nice and trim again.*

“The garden’s amazing, right? Perhaps I should stop using that word. I feel I’ve been calling everything amazing since I landed.”

“No, you’re quite right. I’d be worried if you *weren’t* reacting the way you are... Would you mind turning this way?”

Maris, who’s watching me be impressed by the spectacle of the place, has me stand behind a small tree, then takes three steps away from me. Just a little ways away from the road that will take us right to the castle, I am hiding behind a tree in the royal gardens.

I hope no one gets mad at us for leaving the path and coming into the garden... I glance back at the road, nervous that some guard’s coming to haul us off the Isle. Maris, of course, just laughs when she sees me getting anxious.

Hey, gimme a break. I’m not used to all this! Can someone really “get used to” this place, anyway?

“Here we go,” she says, pointing her finger at me as if she’s about to cast a spell.

“Hey, Maris, what—”

Before I can ask what she intends to do to me, she starts reciting an incantation, and a blue light envelops my entire body.

—*Shelshel!*

—*Shelshel!*

—*Howan!*

The magic takes hold of me and twirls me around three times midair before gently letting me back down on the ground.

Something’s different. The instant I’d stopped twirling, I’d felt something different about the way the fabric of my clothes felt against my skin.

“Hey, is this...?”

“It’s rather pretty, don’t you think? Made special for you, by me.”

“By you?!”

The mostly white dress has subtle blue embroidery running over parts of it in the shapes of delicate flowers, vines, and leaves. It’s a dress that reveals my shoulders, which would normally be called “sleeveless,” except that extending from halfway down my forearm to my wrist, my arms are wrapped in transparent, flowing fabric that flutters gently in the breeze.

I lift up the hem of my skirt to see that my shoes have changed as well, to white high heels.

“As it turns out, I’m rather good at sewing.”

“I’m not sure if you can call making an entire dress merely ‘sewing,’ and you clearly aren’t just ‘good’ at it either...oh!”

The fabric around my stomach and thighs tightens. Maris had just twitched her fingers, so she’d probably caused that to happen.

“There, now it’s drawn in a little more firmly around your hips, yes? Oh, by the way, I teleported the clothes you were wearing to my carriage, okay? But I

simply couldn't get rid of that lovely necklace you have on, so I left that as it was."

I reach up and brush my fingers against the locket holding the small couplet flower.

My fanciest navy blue clothes having gone off somewhere (inside the carriage), I am now wearing a dress that despite the gentle waves in the fabric and lace frill, feels weighty. It feels *expensive*.

There's no doubt about it: the dress I have on is nothing short of extravagant.

"I'm to wear this inside the castle...?"

"Oh goodness dear, you aren't about to complain about my sense of fashion, are you?"

I try imagining how what I'm wearing looks to another person.

Not only are my breasts not as large as hers, I have the barest amount of makeup on my face. I don't wear that much makeup on a normal basis anyway, but today I made a point of putting on lipstick. Sure, it's a step up from nothing, but I feel rather guilty that she went to all the trouble of making this dress for me when I don't have the face to match it.

"Now now! Let us be off!"

Maris seems completely satisfied with my appearance, however, and links her arm in mine as we return to the road leading up to the palace. Well, I suppose that technically we're already *on the palace grounds*, but ahead of us I can see the grand entrance doors wide open. As we approach, I notice Knights lining the road on either side of us. *Oh, I'm completely out of my element here, aren't I?* I'm despairing at the prospect of yet again being the odd one out inside that hall.

If I'd known we were coming to a place like this, I would have done more to mentally prepare myself!!

"Wait, wait up Maris—I don't know anything about etiquette or anything!"

Maris totally ignores me. We go through the palace doors, the sight of them triggering the unpleasant memory of when I was last here.

I've no idea why, but this year I've had a lot of run-ins with rich people at their homes. Illegally trespassing while I do so, I might add. Not that I'm about to tell those stories to anyone here tonight.

No one's complaining to me *directly* for being a commoner inside the hall, but still—I can't relax.

"Is that Lady Maris, daughter of Marquess Caromines?"

"With a commoner friend?"

"Oh, look—Marquess Perry has brought one as well."

"Still, there are fewer here than last year, I think."

Practically everyone around me is an aristocrat, of course, and they're all looking at me and the other rare commoners with distinct curiosity. *When this many people are looking at me, with that look in their eyes, they make it quite clear that despite the smiles on their faces, I am not one of them. But it's not disgust in their eyes—it feels more like admiration.*

I'd always heard the noble kids refer to the world of capital-S Society as a constant battle of the competing *wills* of the combatants—and now I understand why. *All these people have clearly spent a good deal of time and energy memorizing the names and faces of all the other aristocrats. Of course they'd recognize the appearance of a new challenger in the court.*

Before we entered the palace, back on the road leading up to the doors, I asked Maris if it really was okay for her to be bringing me, a commoner, to an event like this—and she'd told me it was, and for a surprisingly simple reason.

From what she told me, a long time ago, there was a Duke who had said to the King, half-seriously, half-jokingly, "I wish I could've brought my commoner friend along tonight." The King had surprised him with his answer: "Sure, go on right ahead, I don't mind. You're an excellent fellow, and I'm sure any friend you brought wouldn't be a bad addition to the party. But only one, and only for the Festival of the Flower Goddess." The Duke had assented to the suggestion, and from there the tradition had started. Even now, the houses bearing the ranks of Duke or Marquess could bring exactly one commoner along to the annual banquet and ball that followed the festival.

After she told me this, I was a little surprised myself. *Is that so? What a liberal King*, I'd thought. The current King, of course, could do away with this exception to the rule if he so pleased, but it's continued on throughout his reign regardless, perhaps as a symbol of the Kingdom's peace between the nobility and the commoners.

Furthermore, the Duke had been none other than Premier Querohli! I had started laughing to myself when I heard that part. *All it takes to change the course of history is one Great Man or Great Woman—or one Great Weirdo.*

Back to the present moment. "Dearie, we studied etiquette a little back at school, did we not? Please, relax! I won't force you to join me in any of the *formal* circles. Besides, I've heard that Sir Alois is bringing along someone that I'm sure you'll feel quite at home with."

"Someone I know?"

Someone I'll "feel at home with?"

* * * *

She brings me into the palace's Great Hall.

"Wow..."

"Come on now, forward!" Maris urges me onwards, but I can't help but be distracted by how the interior's changed since the last time I was here. Back then, the walls of the hallway had been decorated with white and gold, with several portraits and landscapes hanging here and there, and the floor had been red. But now we are walking on a verdant green floor, the walls are lined with flower vases, and there's not a painting to be seen. Once we enter the Great Hall itself, my eyes dart to more differences in the decor throughout the room. The angel that had been on the ceiling is gone, and in its place is a painting of the sun and moon. The glittering light of the crystalline floor is illuminated in certain places, creating the illusion that we are all floating up into the night sky.

Maris notices me gawking at it all. "Amazing, isn't it?"

"Yeah." Like she says, the palace is amazing all by itself, especially the artistic skill displayed in all of the interior decorations. But what I find more astonishing

is that *everything inside* has been changed. *Just how many times a month do they redecorate? They must be spending a fortune on interior design.*

“It’s kinda cool that this many people can fit inside the Hall, right?”

“I must confess, I find that thought a bit *pedestrian*, dear.”

The Great Hall is overflowing with aristocrats. It doesn’t look like anyone’s sitting up on the large thrones for the royal family, and I don’t see Prince Zenon standing anywhere either. *But at a gathering like this, Rockmann’s sure to be here. Maris had mentioned him earlier. There’s no way he’d miss out on an event like this.*

A few moments later, we encounter Maris’s parents, and I greet them like any respectful young lady would. Their hair is the same color as hers. Maris’s mother is incredibly beautiful, and I can see that that’s where she gets that piercing gaze of hers. Her father, Marquess Caromines, on the other hand, has somewhat drooping eyes, but when he smiles I can see a good deal of his daughter in him.

“A pleasure to meet you,” I say to them.

“Oh, are you Nanalie? Thanks for all the interesting stories,” they reply with a smile, and while I can’t hide my feeling that the fact that they hear “interesting stories” about me is *slightly* concerning, Maris acts like she has no idea what they might be talking about.

Maris tells her parents that we’re going to go around and say hello to a few people, and we leave them behind. I accompany her as she moves through the Hall, socializing with this or that person. She’d said she wouldn’t force me to socialize with any “formal” people, and she keeps her word: almost all of the people we speak with are former classmates.

“Dear, I do hope you’ll forgive me for dragging you around like this—I can’t leave you alone here after all, not that I’d ever *dream* of doing so. Still, I apologize if you’re feeling overwhelmed.”

Maris seems to feel rather guilty as she apologizes for having taken me around to speak with all of her various acquaintances. While I wonder if my presence is a nuisance, if Maris feels apologetic for inconveniencing *me*, I

suppose I'm not a bother to her after all.

Having said that, we aren't of equal rank, and I can't help but notice the stares of those around us. Just like on the way up here, commoners in a crowd like this tend to stand out, for better or worse. Even now, well after we've arrived, the bearded gentlemen and the ladies concealing their smiles with handheld fans look over at me with rather inquisitive gazes. I might be just overthinking things, of course, but I can't help but notice that despite Maris telling me to "pay the stares no mind," the people around me are paying *me* a good deal of their minds.

There are other commoners here. Please, look at them instead.

I am starting to feel uncomfortable again, so I fix my gaze on Maris's back, my one safe harbor in these tumbling seas of high society.

"Dear, please! You aren't a *ghost*, right?"

"....."

She doesn't seem to like me hiding behind her. As soon as I do so, she turns around and places me firmly at her side.

—*Tap tap.*

Someone taps my shoulder from behind.

I am caught quite by surprise, and my shoulders practically leap out of their sockets at the sensation.

"Yo, Nanalie."

"Wha... Satanás?!"

I turn my head to the side to find Satanás standing there in formalwear, hair carefully styled. He's laughing and holding a glass in one hand. *He must have used a lot of hair gel to make his silver curls look like that—he's practically shining. If you're gonna use that much gel, Satanás, you'd be better off just studying a hair-straightening spell, but you weren't ever that good at studying, were you?* Despite his lack of diligence in his studies, however, he'd always had that knack for being able to pull off a new spell with minimal effort.

But why's he here, of all places?

“Like I said, right? Someone you can ‘feel at home with,’ yeah?”

Next to me, Maris has one hand over her mouth as she lets out that ridiculous, high-pitched laugh. “*O-ho-ho-ho!*”

“So you’re here too, Nanalie. I ain’t heard nothin’ ‘bout you comin’ here from him, though.”

“Him?”

“Rockmann, yeah?”

“Rockmann?”

Why’s his name coming up right now?

According to what Satanás tells me, he’s been going out drinking with Rockmann lately—not often, but often enough—and during one of those nights out together, he’d invited Satanás to the banquet and ball going on here tonight.

“But what about Benjamine?” I ask, and he tells me that she wanted to spend the evening with her family, and hadn’t asked about his plans for the night of the festival. His face, for some reason, grows a bit gloomy as he says that. *Satanás must be confused about their relationship as well.*

“Well, I bet Rockmann didn’t even think that I’d be here, so obviously he couldn’t tell you that, right?”

“Oh dearie, I told him in my letters that I intended to invite you, though.”

“So he *did* know,” Satanás says, cocking his head to one side.

“Why, when Sir Alois informed me that he was going to bring a *fool* of a man like you, Satanás, I decided that I was going to invite Nanalie.”

“When you put it like that, you make it sound like *I’m* a ‘fool’ too, you know...”

Now I get it. So that’s why Maris knew Satanás was coming. Putting that aside, however, I still haven’t seen any sign of Rockmann here tonight...

Satanás tells me he’s just arrived, and Rockmann was with him when he came in, but excused himself by saying that he “had more work to do.”

Satanás, of course, being Satanás, had been completely fine on his own. He tells me that he had a grand old time strolling around the room and “enjoying the sights” of all the beautiful women.

This guy's helpless.

“Why, of course you’re not a ‘fool,’ dear! You’re a rather excellent conversation starter, or should I say, topic of conversation. I’m always telling Mother and Father such wonderfully amusing stories about you, you know.”

“Can’t you just talk about me like I’m *normal*?!”

“Whoa, not many people will say such nice things about you, Nanalie, yeah? Take good care of your friends?”

“Ugh, you are so irritating.”

Satanás has just been called a fool here, and yet I’m the one who’s being made fun of.

Still, I wonder—had Rockmann known I was going to be here tonight? Back when we met earlier in the market?

“Try to enjoy the Season of Flowers,” he’d said to me.

Ugh. What a truly loathsome man.

“I’ll have you know that I sometimes mention you in my letters to Sir Rockmann, you know, just as a way of *breaking the ice* between us.”

“Good grief, Maris. Just have a normal conversation with him! You aren’t saying anything weird about me, right?”

“Oh my goodness, dear, ‘weird’? To whatever might you refer?”

“What’s that face you’re making...?”

“It won’t do to speak of such things here! The royal family’s just about to make their appearance, you know, so off we go!”

“Hey! You’re totally avoiding answering me!”

Maris fans herself with her hand and turns her back on me. As I’m glaring at her back, Satanás taps me again.

“She’s a pretty sweet gal, ain’t she?”

Irritating! Irritating to the last!

“Now comes His Highness, the King!”

Near the thrones, an older gentleman wearing a monocle unfurls a long, thin scroll. At his words, all of the aristocrats in the Great Hall lift their heads to look at the dais atop the stairs. Next to each of the thrones, one member of the royal family appears. I see the King, the Queen, the Princes, and the Princess. Prince Zenon, of course, is up there with the rest of them.

Maris and the other aristocrats are beginning to bow their heads in respect. Satanás and I get a bit flustered as we realize this and hurry to do the same.

“Another year has passed, and here we all are to greet another Season of Flowers, in peace.”

The King’s low voice reverberates throughout the Hall.

“By the grace of Pramána, we are here to give thanks for another year of good health and prosperity. May the glorious light of Doran fall into the hands of you all.”

Once the King has said this, Maris gives me an insistent *tap* on the shoulder. I look over at her to see that she’s raised her right hand in the air, as if she’s holding up some imaginary glass. *What in the world...?* “You do it too,” she whispers. I look around and see everyone standing in much the same way, one hand raised towards the King.

I nod my head and make a circle with my right thumb and forefinger, just like Maris, and lift it up into the air.

“Cheers!”

When the King says “cheers,” a clear glass appears in my hand. Inside the glass is a red liquid that smells faintly of fruity liquor. *I’ve seen the “Magic Toast” spell in books before, but to have experienced it for the first time in this manner is rather delightful.*

The royal family, having made their toast, sit down on their thrones.

“Crown Prince Arman has grown up to be an impressive man. I must be on my way to bid him a good evening.”

“Darling, you wouldn’t want to cut the line ahead of Count Riesling now, would you?”

“Oh don’t mind me, please, Baron, you first.”

A great crowd of people begins to form a line leading up to the King. The line is so long that it snakes through the room, curling this way and that several times. *This is going to take a while.* I take a sip of the wine as I try to find the end of the queue.

“Must be difficult, being King. You have to say hello to all those people!”

“Well, he does have Premier Markin next to him helping out, you know? He tells the King who’s who, so there’s never any trouble with the names. Sir Alois is also standing guard near His Highness as well, should any trouble come up.” What Maris says makes sense. It’d be impossible, even for a King, to memorize the names of every single aristocrat in the Kingdom.

I look beyond the front of the line where the King and the Queen Consort are sitting.

On the four chairs next to them sit: Crown Prince Arman, first in line to the throne, Prince Nortis, second in line to the throne, Prince Zenon, third in line to the throne, and then the youngest, Princess Mislina. All of them look perfectly at ease up there.

Around them, of course, stand the Knights in their uniforms. Rockmann looks like he’s dressed in precisely the same outfit I saw him in earlier. The couplet stuck inside his left breast pocket is still there. *Has he been working all this time?* My jaw drops a bit in astonishment at the possibility.

“He’s being totally overworked...”

“What was that, dear?”

I shake my head. “Nothing.”

When I heard he was here, I expected him to have arrived in some fancy outfit, ready to enjoy the party. I shut my mouth and divert my gaze to the

floor.

Not everything in life is a contest, but I can't help but feel somewhat disgusted with myself for having enjoyed the whole day, carefree as can be, while his loathsome face has been working all day. I admit that I'm a little—just a tiny, tiny bit—concerned for Rockmann's health.

But it's not just him. Nikeh and Prince Zenon have been at it all day as well, even on a holiday like today.

Even knowing that, however, it makes me feel strange to see my mortal foe—I mean, Rockmann—being treated in such a fashion. It's like my back is itchy and I can't reach there to scratch it, or worse, like my very teeth are itching.

You know what? I'm going to work even harder tomorrow.

“Hm?”

I try to get my mind off Rockmann and look at the back of the line. I realize I recognize the person standing there, and he's recognized me as well. He gives me a smile of recognition, and I give him a slight nod in return.

It's Duke Rockmann himself. On an occasion like this, I'd expect him to be at the front of the line—but perhaps that's just me. I focus my attention on the conversation going on between Maris and Satanás. He points one finger up at the head of the long line.

“Maris, are you sure it's alright, us not going up there?”

“Oh no, whatever are you suggesting? I'm going up there, alright.” She nods her head in certainty. “You'll be coming along with me, Nanalie.”

“Me, too?!”

Her words are enough to send my blood pulsing in a frenzied tempo as I contemplate the possibility of being face-to-face with the King.

“Heh, good for you,” Satanás says, laughing rather maliciously, as if he has nothing at all to do with the matter. *Yet another irritating thing for him to say. I don't suppose I could drag him along...?* I notice then that Maris is looking at me rather closely.

“You received an invitation, despite the fact that you're not a noble. It would

be rude not to make an appearance before His Highness.”

“Can you call that an invitation? All I’ve been given are the scraps of conversation you see fit to involve me in...”

“Goodness me, dear, you stop that nonsense. Satanás? You’re coming with us as well.”

“Me, too?! You gotta be joking!”

I see that even one so chill as Satanás finds the prospect daunting as he breaks out into a cold sweat. *The idea of meeting the King is enough to make even the most relaxed among us feel panicked. Now I really want to see how he acts in front of Prince Zenon, all awkward like the little boy he is.* (Perhaps this last thought is a bit immature, even for me.)

“Sir Alois is busy up there, you know, and can’t be bothered to accompany you around everywhere, right?”

“Then why’d he invite me anyway?” *And now he’s pouting. Child.*

“Why, so you could meet with His Highness Prince Zenon, of course. The two of you got along so well, didn’t you?”

“You think that’s why? Huh. I guess Zenon always was a loner, crazy as that sounds.”

“And *how* is that a convincing explanation of your presence here, may I ask?”

At Maris’s urging, Satanás and I go with her to the back of the line.

Next to me, I hear Satanás still mumbling to himself. “Is that how it is? Yeah, always knew he was lonely, but like, *for real* though...” *Please, please don’t go saying stuff like that in front of Prince Zenon.* Imagining that possibility makes me shiver with trepidation, but I say nothing, slowly stepping forward as the line moves, one person at a time.

It feels like we’ve been waiting in line for half an hour. We’re—finally—halfway there. *Surprising, really, that this line would be so slow.*

I turn to Maris. “Can’t people be a little more...efficient? In talking to the King?”

“Well, maybe...but ‘efficiency’ isn’t something people are thinking about on a day like today. There are quite a few aristocrats here that normally don’t get a chance to talk to the royal family, so everyone’s being given ample time to speak with them, since it’s the day of the Flower Goddess Festival and all.”

I’m the type of person who refuses to wait in lines, even at restaurants. *I do believe this is the longest I’ve ever had to wait in line.* The realization makes me feel faint.

“You said this was a banquet, earlier—when’s the food coming?”

“It’ll come, in time. Once this is done with. But then we also have the ball to look forward to, so don’t eat so much that you can’t dance.”

Satanás groans behind us. “Ugh, this is taking *forever*.”

Maris glances around to see if anyone else heard him. No one looks upset. She leans towards him, shielding her mouth with her fan to whisper, in a very sharp tone: “...Satanás, dear, would you *kindly* keep such opinions to yourself, hmm?”

I may be impatient, but I don’t want to cause any trouble for Maris, like this lout is doing.

“My bad,” he says, laughing and brushing away her fan. An instant later, however, more whining escapes his lips: “But *dang* this is taking *for-e-ver*.” Maris whirls around and pinches both his cheeks.

“Ouchhhhh!”

“We’re not going to have any more of *that* from you, are we?”

“U ‘ys r za on’s o’ ‘orced’e ‘o ‘ome (You guys are the ones who *forced* me to come)!”

“Oh, that’s right—Nanalie dear, are you aware of why the selection of your final dance partner matters so much tonight?”

Maris completely ignores Satanás, who’s now massaging his bright red cheeks, and looks askance at me.

A little puzzled by the sudden shift in conversation, I nod in response to Maris’s question.

“You told me before, so yeah, I know.”

“Why! Did I now?”

“The last person you dance with is ‘life,’ right?”

Just as there is a song for men and women to have a classical, ballroom dance with each other, just as there is another song where a single dancer performs alone on the floor, there is yet another dance that is supposed to symbolize one’s life. Just as in the fairy tales of old, in each song lies a beginning, a middle, and an end. The final song starts slow and builds to an intense frenzy, only to fade out, quietly solemn at the end. There is a meaning to the order of the songs played at a ball, meant to shape the atmosphere of the room from one extreme to another. The first song, as the beginning of the story, is bright and happy; the next is a difficult, roiling wave of complex harmonies; and then the last song is a slow, slow waltz. Each song fulfills a role in the evening’s proceedings.

The last song symbolizes the end of the story—the end of one’s life. It is for this reason that there is a special meaning implied when one selects their final dancing partner:

“Wasn’t it something like, ‘I want to be together with you until the end of my life,’ or something?”

“Just so. That is why it is so important to choose the right man to dance with, at the end.”

“Who have *you* had a ‘last dance’ with at balls like this, Maris?”

“Oh, *completely* tedious gentlemen, my dear. Several times, in fact.” She doesn’t seem to want to elaborate. She puffs out her cheeks, and her eyes look a bit moist at the memories. I can’t tell if she’s frustrated or sad, but it’s clear that no matter what the details of her previous experiences were, they weren’t pleasant ones.

“Who’s Rockmann going to dance with?”

“Sir Alois always dances with either Lady Norweira or the Queen. Or he doesn’t dance at all and merely stands by the wall. At some of the recent balls, however, Princess Carolla of the Kingdom of Sheera was here, so he danced

with her.”

“It’s not easy to dance with him, then?”

“There are many ladies who would *want* to, of course, but they can’t just take him away from the Queen or Lady Norweira now, can they? But he still does me the favor of being my partner for all the other dances, so I don’t mind too much, and I do appreciate that they prevent him from being taken by any *other* potential partners.”

She places one hand against her cheek and lets out a sweet, soft sigh as she stares dreamily off in the direction of the royal table.

“Prince Zenon does the same, you know,” she tells me. “He either dances with the Queen or the Princess, or on occasion his aunt, Rockmann’s mother.”

“Back when we had that dance during the graduation party, everyone tried so hard to dance with him at the end, didn’t they? Even now, I think it was a bit sad, really, to see them so desperate.”

“Well, I certainly was surprised to learn that *you* were his last dance, but when the two of you re-entered the Hall, butting heads as though you were wild beasts...! Why, no one could mistake that last dance as having had any special meaning for either of you. I must confess that I was relieved to see you two fighting so,” she says.

“How rude,” I say, only half-serious.

We’d gone back into the hallway yelling awful insults at each other.

“You old lecher!”

“You clumsy hag!”

How did I go from, “One day I’ll beat him for sure, fair and square!” to screaming insults at him at a party? Well, while I can’t quite answer that question, I do know that everything I said to him back then was completely justified. After all, there’s no doubt that he truly is a philandering scoundrel, leading women on wild goose chases for his love.

“Anyway, I don’t know just how far you two go at it with each other, but please *do* try to keep yourself in check. It’d be quite awful if you injured Sir

Alois.”

“As if he’d ever let himself get injured!”

I’ve never once seen him with so much as a scratch on him. I have seen him covered in ice several times, though.

“Oh, is that so? Shall I take that to mean you think he is too strong to be injured by you?”

“Hey! You set me up,” I say, pouting.

“O-ho-ho-ho!”

She’s definitely teasing me right now.

“Hey, look—those idiots are stuffing their faces,” Satanás interrupted.

“What?”

“Um, Satanás dear, *please do not refer to aristocrats as ‘those idiots’?!’*” Maris, who’d been laughing at me just a second ago, has now blown up again at hearing Satanás say yet another impossibly rude thing.

I look over to where he indicated. Those that have already greeted the King and his family are snacking on something... *No, “snacking” isn’t the right word. Whatever they’re eating is probably worth more than its weight in gold—they’re enjoying some rather pricey hors d’oeuvres.*

“Delicious!” I hear one of the noble ladies say, one hand covering her mouth. Satanás and I are drooling at the sight of the food.

“Nanalie, please—not you too.”

“I’m fine, I swear!”

Yikes, that was close. I casually turn my head away from Maris and wipe the edge of my lips. *I’m not even particularly hungry, but just seeing all that delicious food makes my stomach growl...!*

“YOUR MAJESTY!!”

As I hold one hand over my stomach, the heavy silver doors of the Great Hall *crash* wide open and the Knight Commander sprints inside. Following close behind him is a stream of other Knights, filling the room. *What in the world?!*

Maris looks surprised as well. “Whatever could this be about...?” All of the nobles and familiars in the room are buzzing with interest as they watch the Commander approach the throne.

“Forgive my intrusion! I’m here to warn you that, as of now—”

—*BOMBOMBOMBAAAAM!!*

All of a sudden, the oval stained glass window high at one end of the hall shatters inward, showering glass everywhere. People standing below it quickly throw up defensive barriers that protect them from the shards.

What could that possibly be?

“Look what we have here—a gaggle of courtly fools drunk on a false peace.”

A man’s guttural voice emanates from a darkly glimmering ball of black light floating above us. It hangs there, indefinite in shape, cavorting from one end of the ceiling to the other. Trying to get a better look at it, I follow it around the room with my eyes. *Black, purple, and green. The voice is definitely coming from inside the sphere.*

“Everyone stand back!”

“Uh, right...” Satanás, Maris, and I back up against the wall, away from the sphere, like everyone else is doing. The Knights, now with room to spare, dash into formation as they attempt to surround the thing. All of them have their fingers pointed up at it, ready to unleash their magic.

“Goodness, what’s the meaning of all this? What do you suppose *that* is?”

“No idea. Seems demonic, though.”

I catch a glance of the Commander. He has a ruthlessly ferocious expression on his face—not at all what he looks like when he’s arguing with the Director. *So he can be a pretty scary guy after all.* My eyes dart back up at the sphere. *But what is that thing?*

The three of us look at each other. All of us appear equally confused, brows furrowed with worry.

“Ladies, I’ll bet you anything that *is* a demon,” Satanás says, frowning up at the ceiling.

“But why would it be here on the Royal Isle...?”

Satanás bends down a little to whisper in my ear. “The security around the island—none of that was normal, right? Even we could see that, yeah? They definitely were on their guard, before this even started.”

Sure, there *had* been a good number of Knights flying around on pegasi around the island, patrolling the approach up to the Isle. I’d thought their presence odd at first, but had dismissed the thought, assuming that having that much security was merely standard procedure when a large number of nobles gathered at the palace.

Even so, just like Satanás says—the security did seem tighter than it should have been. Not that I had had the faintest idea that they were guarding against something like this. The nobles around us look positively beside themselves with disbelief at the turn of events, all of them staring up at that floating sphere glimmering darkly in the center of the Hall.

Clearly an uninvited guest.

“Foul creature! Name thyself!”

The King’s voice has not the barest trace of panic in it. It reverberates throughout every part of the Hall, the mere sound exuding strength.

Rockmann is standing in front of the King, protecting him. Beside him, Prince Zenon glares at the center of the room with a grim expression on his face.

“My name? The King and all of the King’s men know my name. Despite your knowledge of my coming, despite all your Knights standing guard—here I am, having not faced even the slightest difficulty getting here. Pathetic.”

The voice sounds like it is holding back laughter.

“You’re all the same. Sheera, Naraguru, and the rest made the same faces as you fools here in Doran. Comical, the lot of you.”

“What do you seek by coming here, wretch?”

“I desire to see you all quivering with great terror as you gaze upon my exalted self!”

The voice grows louder as it roars back at the King. He leaps off his throne and

points one finger at the sphere, shouting, “Knights! Rid us of that infernal devil!” His deep, resonating tone reverberates right down the spines of every single person in the room. I *feel* his words more than I hear them.

“Hahaha! Hahahaha! Idiots! You shall not land a single blow upon me!!”

A high-pitched laugh sounds throughout the room as the sphere spirals around overhead.

At the King’s command, the Knights are lobbing spells of exorcism at it, but the sphere dodges them all, edging its way towards the nobles sheltering themselves up against the wall.

But it’s not like the nobles are without magic. Unlike commoners, they are much more experienced in magical combat, and all of them have cast shield charms protecting them from any attack the sphere might make. Satanás, Maris, and I have shielded ourselves in the same manner, of course.

“I’ve no need to trouble myself with you. These little ones shall be enough.”

At those words from the sphere, out from a whirlwind at the center of the room blasts several—no, *dozens*—of strange-looking demons. The nobles have no choice but to engage these newcomers in battle, and drop their shields to go on the offensive.

“Nanalie! Protect yourself!”

“Wha—?!”

“I can’t just hide behind my shield all day!”

To my left, Maris lets loose fireballs at the demons, while Satanás is, like a good sorcerer, summoning up a tornado to send the demons flying back out the broken window. His phoenix familiar is flying around him to defend against any stray attacks.

The Great Hall of the palace has, in an instant, become a battlefield.

“How...?”

I still have my shield up as I look around. The Knights look like they’re having trouble getting rid of the sphere. Even the Commander himself is fighting along with the rest of them. Prince Zenon is following his example, tossing lightning

bolts left and right at the whirlwind of demons pouring into the Hall. *The royal family is supposed to be protected, not the protectors—who's taking care of them?* I look up at the dais to see Rockmann's maintaining a thick, powerfully strong shield around the other members of the family. I can tell just how strong it is from how brightly the magic glitters in the air. *The stronger the light, the stronger the shield.*

"What should I do?"

I frown at the demons who keep ramming into my shield. *What sort of attacks can I use here? I'm not supposed to go around being flashy with my Ice magic right now, so I have to think of something else.*

"...That's it!"

There's nothing else I can do. I roll up the hem of my dress and pull the *Dare Labdos* from its leather harness strapped around my inner thigh. I hadn't been able to display it brazenly on my waist, but it was *definitely* the right decision to sneak it in anyway.

I lengthen *Dare Labdos* until it is taller than I am, then slam it down with a *bang* on the floor.

I've had the *Dare Labdos* absorb several magic circles relating to exorcisms. *Wasn't there one with a wide-ranging area of effect that I could use right now...?* I recall the description written in the text where I'd found it.

"Eight times.....incomplete.....space.....arrive, God of Exorcism! I summon thee, Banegate!"

I spin the elongated cudgel, and it radiates silvery light. After spinning it eight times, I lower my shield and stab the Cudgel of the Goddess into the crystalline floor. Magic flows from my fingertips and down my staff.

Once enough magic has gathered in the staff, the air around me begins to flow unevenly, causing my skirt to sway in slow waves. I check to make sure no demons are immediately within striking distance, then begin reciting the incantation for this Circle of Exorcism, one of the pieces of ancient magic I learned.

Before I launch head-on into casting the spell, however, I must recite an

incantation that will summon a guardian spirit. If I miscast the spell and it reflects back on me, there are several ways in which it might take my life. Every time a mage uses a high-level spell like this, they need to have a guardian spirit ready on standby to take the brunt of the curse that will result from a failed spell.

Guardian spirits are, in this case, a form of insurance.

When a child is given their name by their parents, they are also given a middle name from the ancestors. In my case, I received the name “Persephone” from my great-great-great-grandmother. I love the name, as it was chosen just for me by my parents and has been passed down throughout generations.

That middle name is necessary to use when casting spells to summon a guardian spirit.

There are six types of guardian spirit spells, one for every magic type, and as I’m an Ice-Type, this is my incantation:

—*Eternal God and Blood Spirits, I beseech thee*
—*In my own name of Persephone, I call upon thee*
—*Light of the Ice Emperor, shine down upon this Flower’d Land*
—*Freeze Time for Each and Every Living Thing, with your Power’d Hand*
—*A Bridge to Heaven Open*
—*Will of Ice, Key to Conclusion Chosen*
—*Shall Once Again Let Blood be Unfrozen.*

“Arrive, God of Exorcism! Banegate, *arrive!*”

A wind began to blow inside the Hall. Along the crystalline floor, the lines of the magic circle snake around in every direction to encompass the entire dance floor.

At the same time that my circle is being traced, however, I see that a different circle, one gleaming gold, is glimmering *beneath my own*, deeper in the floor.

Someone else is casting a magic circle as well.

It can't be...? I look over to where I saw Rockmann standing earlier. He is, like I am, holding out a staff before him—a golden staff, thrust against the floor of the dais.

I've no idea what he's trying to cast, but I also have no time to think about it. I'm practically defenseless without my magical shield, so I get back to focusing on the spell.

“Larger, larger, *larger*—”

The silver of my magic circle is dappled with rays of gold light cast by Rockmann's shimmering circle.



The light of both reaches a peak—and the demons above my circle freeze, and then begin to melt into the air. There’s a massive *sizzling* sound, as if a great fire is causing a lake of water to evaporate. The demons turn to black smoke, drifting up towards the ceiling, then out through the broken window.

The black sphere stops moving as well. Slowly, it descends from its perch near the ceiling.

Doesn’t look like it’s gotten any weaker, though—it’s still darting all over the place like it has energy to spare.

“I’ve had enough fun for one day. But I warn you, Doran—there will come a day, sooner than you think, when Demons shall rule this Kingdom, shall rule the World itself. But today is not that day.”

“That day shall never come!”

Prince Zenon shouts back at the dark orb.

“All I do, I do for you, Städal. For you, my love.”

And with those final words, the sphere cracked apart, disintegrated, and was heard no more.

* * * *

The sphere is gone, and the Hall is as quiet as a graveyard.

When it vanished with those strange final words, leaving faint wisps of black smoke in its wake, I thought someone might seek after where it had gone. But I look around and see not a single other trace of the black sphere is to be seen anywhere else in the room.

I lift the tip of *Dare Labdos* off the ground. The lines of the magic circle slither back up inside the cudgel and are gone.

Maris immediately runs over to her parents. Apparently, they are unharmed—as is everyone else here, for that matter. *Well, at least we all made it out of that ordeal in one piece.*

The palace servants and personal attendants of the nobles are hurrying about cleaning up the fallen chairs and tables and the spilled beverages, putting things

back in order with magic.

“Seventh Platoon! Assist with the cleanup. Check all the corridors!”

“Commander, I think it might be best if you allowed me to perform a psychometry right now.”

“Yes, indeed. Go ahead.”

The Knights of the Order go around helping the servants put things back into their places and checking the corridors for any remaining demons, just as the Commander ordered. Thanks to their help, the mess of a hall is returned back to its former beauty in minutes.

“What is *that*?”

From a little ways away, I see that Satanás has shrunk his phoenix familiar so that it can sit on his shoulder. He’s watching me shorten the *Dare Labdos* back down to a more portable size.

“This? Oh, it’s uh...a tool I got from work.”

“A tool?”

“Yeah, a tool.”

I could, of course, tell him that it *is* mine—but it’s also something I got on my first day of work, so I do really feel that it’s *mostly* a tool for when I’m on the job. I got it from the *Gígnesthai Nero* inside Harré, and I’m forbidden from telling anyone else about that, so I don’t explain further.

I distract him from asking more questions by twirling the shortened cudgel in the palm of my hand. Satanás still finds my behavior strange—I can tell from the look on his face—but he doesn’t push for answers. “Anyhow, that was amazing,” he says, and our conversation about the cudgel is over.

That’s what I like about Satanás—never pushy, never stubborn. Really glad to have him around.

“But enough about that—did you see me, Nanalie? I was looking pretty cool there while I was fighting, right?”

He’s pointing his thumb at his chest, acting like the cockiest guy in town. I

glare right at him.

As if I had any time to look at you during the fight!

“I’ll be sure to tell Benjamine that you wanted my opinion on how ‘cool’ you looked.”

“Ugh, you’re so *boring*, Nanalie... Anyways, how’s the King gonna explain all this? That black thing talked like the King and the Knights *knew* this was gonna happen. Alois didn’t tell me anything though...” He looks up at the dais, where Rockmann is still standing.

“Who knows...”

I shift my gaze slightly to watch the King standing firm up on the dais, his expression grim. Rockmann has dispelled the magic barrier, but the King is unmoved as he looks down at all of us.

While the nobles still appear somewhat unsettled from the battle that has just ended, none of them are panicking or up in arms in outrage against the King. A commoner might shout, “What the hell was that all about?!” but the nobles are quietly waiting for whatever the King might say next.

The Knights, who had been busy helping clean up the mess, gather back in the Hall and stand before the Knight Commander and Prince Zenon to give their report, only to disperse and leave through the large doors at the rear of the Hall shortly thereafter.

The Knight Commander remains where he is. Prince Zenon returns to his seat next to Princess Mislina. *Nikeh wasn’t among the Knights who’d come into the palace. I bet she’s patrolling the perimeter.*

“Hey, that’s Rockmann’s dad, right? So he is here.”

“You know him, Satanás?”

“Just in passing. I saw him when I went over to hang out at Rockmann’s house the other day.”

Michael Rockmann, father of Alois Rockmann, has appeared seemingly out of nowhere and is now standing next to the Premier, speaking with him about something or other. Satanás must’ve noticed him standing there for him to

make that comment about going over to “hang out” at *his* house.

“‘Hang out’?”

“Well, basically. I guess I was really over there to ask him what the plans for tonight were. But then they gave me this awesome food! It wasn’t just the meat melting in my mouth, but the *vegetables* too! First time I’d ever experienced that in my life, that’s for sure.”

The food he’d been given had seemingly been *quite* delicious, because now he’s drooling again with his head tilted to one side. *That’s right—we still haven’t eaten anything.*

I give his face a couple of good *slaps* to bring him back to normal.

I can’t have him making such a slovenly face at a time like this!

Hmmm...a time like this. I look around the room seeking Dr. Aristo, or should I say, “Count Huey.” I see no one who resembles his small, portly figure—no kind little gentleman.

Everyone is looking up at the King, who seems completely aware of the attention. He closes his eyes for a moment, then, without saying anything, looks down at the upturned faces of the nobles. Finally, like the opening of a heavy, thick door, the King slowly opens his mouth to speak.

“Protectors of the Realm,” he says, “there is something I must tell you.”

Rockmann moves from his place beside the King to stand next to Prince Zenon. The King looks behind him, makes eye contact with the Crown Prince, then turns back to face the rest of us with a little *ahem*.

“With regards to that demon: for the past several months, that black sphere has been sighted in all of the surrounding Kingdoms—Sheera, Naraguru, Dognis, and Welwedi. Each time, it appeared at an event like tonight’s: one where the most powerful members of the Kingdom assemble together.

“In the interest of peace, friendship, and cooperation, the rulers of the neighboring Kingdoms, and myself, have held Royal *Bacches* Conferences where we discuss such matters, and it was at such a *Bacches* that I learned of this creature.

“Just as we witnessed here tonight, the demon had harmed not a soul in the other realms, only appearing to terrorize all those who saw it before threatening them and then leaving the scene. In order not to cause a panic amongst our subjects, we have been cooperating with the other Kingdoms to ensure that all those who witness the appearance of the black sphere are bound by a Blood Oath to not speak a word about it to anyone who was not present.”

The sphere did seem like it was just here to “play,” considering the fact that no one got injured. Maybe it just wanted to scare us.

The King continues, “Knights and Mages of the surrounding Kingdoms have attempted to trace the sphere back to its source, but they have been unable to locate where it comes from thus far.

“Furthermore, in each of the other Kingdoms, the sphere also spoke of this ‘Städal,’ but we have not yet discovered what it means by that. Perhaps it is the sorcerer who controls it, or worse, some other fell creature as yet unknown to our civilization.

“As the matter is still under investigation...” *Hold on, is he going where I think he’s going with this?*

“What happened here tonight *cannot* be revealed to the subjects of Doran. There may be a day when they come to know of this menace, but for now, we shall increase the security on our borders. Still, no matter how thorough our defense, a strange being that wields such magic so as to come hither and thither without the slightest difficulty poses issues for us until we can ascertain its nature... Even if we *should* discover what it is, we must be even more vigilant in protecting our lands than ever before. Beyond your domains, the Order of Knights shall protect the Kingdom, and its people. Until that day on which all shall know of this, however, I must have you bound by Blood Oath not to speak of this matter. Moreover—I have already had the Oath bound upon you all.”

Of course I’d thought we’d have to make a Blood Oath, but for it to have happened in this rather unexpected and sudden manner causes me no little surprise. “Whaaat?” I say, slapping Satanás’s arm next to me in shock. *Oh dear. I’ve done it now.* Or so I think—but all around me, I hear voices very much like

my own, as the room is thrown into a susurrating roar of murmurs, whispers, and exclamations of surprise.

The Crown Prince rises to stand next to his father. “Silence!”

The King continues, “Moments ago, I had the Captain of the First Platoon, our Chief Mage, cast the spell upon you all. I am the one who gave the order. I know it was improper of me to have done so without warning you all first, but should any wish to have the spell removed, I shall now hear your complaints.”

A Blood Oath is, as it sounds, *normally* an oath sealed in blood, between two people. There’s an incantation, in fact: *“Upon this blood, so do I swear: shall I break this vow, may my body shrivel to a dry husk, never to breathe again.”*

Basically, you die if you don’t keep your word.

Having said that, there is flexibility allowed for by this spell—the oath-giver may speak to anyone that the oath-caster permits them to, but not anyone else. Plus, the likelihood of actually dying due to this spell is quite low: try and speak to anyone not permitted by the caster, and your mouth will simply seal itself shut.

That means that I can talk to Maris and Satanás about what happened here, but I can’t breathe a word about it to either Benjamine or Zozo. Doesn’t the Blood Oath usually require the consent of both parties to take effect, however?

Others are clearly thinking along the same lines. “But how did he...?”

No explanation is given. The Captain of the First Platoon, Rockmann, who’s standing next to Prince Zenon, merely gives a small bow, then looks back at us with a relaxed, serious expression.

“Oh, I wonder—”

“What?”

“Um, never mind.”

The Blood Oath spell that Rockmann cast—might it have been the magic he was doing with that golden magic circle? I’ve never seen nor heard of a circle like that. He might have made it up himself.

Not a single person whispers so much as a solitary complaint against what the

King has said.

But it's not because he's scary, or anything. The nobles are, if anything, people with good sense (if perhaps loathsome personalities), so I doubt there's even one person here who doesn't understand why the Crown Prince ordered as he did.

"If the Crown Prince ordered Sir Alois to do so, you'll hear no complaint from me," says a noble nearby, and others seem to be saying the same. Personally I *don't* agree with that line of reasoning, but no one else seems to find it disagreeable, so there's no room for me to object to having my lips sealed.

Even Satanás, who is often ridiculed by both Maris and Prince Zenon alike as a tactless buffoon, merely says, "Well, guess there's no helping that," while sticking his pinky finger up his nose as he continues watching the King.

...Perhaps in his case, it's beyond "tactless." The words "Satanás" and "tact" don't even belong in the same sentence, anyway.

But aren't I one of "those commoners" who must not know about tonight's events? I don't see anyone giving me a funny or suspicious look. I suppose I am bound by the same Oath that they are, so there's nothing for them to worry about.

* * * *

"It's scary how quickly everyone got back into the partying mood," I say, glancing around at the nobles who are enjoying some lighthearted banter over dinner as we all sit at our tables eating.

There had been no change in the plans, and the banquet began a while ago. Sitting at long tables that stretch from one end of the Hall to the other, all of us are relaxing in white chairs adorned with images of the sun, the stars, and the moon.

While I *did* say the nobles were "bantering," the topics of conversation are anything but playful. I catch fragments of conversations discussing how they plan to improve their domain defenses, concerns about the safety of the surrounding countries, and weary complaints about how much they'll have to take care of once they go home. *The nobles may appear to be at ease, but the*

earlier unrest is certainly not far from anyone's mind.

I, of course, as a commoner, have nothing to say about such matters. I resolve to focus my energies on the lovely feast before me...but find I cannot, only grabbing at a morsel or two from time to time. The servants behind me are most helpful as they switch out plates of food when a new course begins, but I find it rather difficult to eat with someone standing right behind me. It'd be fine if they weren't looking at me, but the whole time, they're just *watching* me eat. It seems like they're watching me, the commoner, even more closely than everyone else, because the *instant* my plate is clear they immediately call out to offer me the next plate.

I'm grateful for the wonderful service, but still—it's embarrassing.

"Why, of course! Should one get oneself worked up into a state after something like *that*, why, that person would be *entirely* unsuitable to be the master of a domain, yes? ...Oh, what is it, Marquise Halmagyi?"

It's nice of Maris to sit next to me, but she's busied herself the entire dinner by speaking with this or that noble about various aristocratic obligations. I just try to stay out of her way, lower my inquisitive gaze, and sip my drink.

"Hey, you...the young lady with the blue hair? Might you be acquainted with Miss Maris through your time at magic school?"

"Oh, yes ma'am. We were quite inseparable back then."

"Well now! Why of *course* you were," the lady says, smiling.

Sometimes, people do talk directly to me, so I can't shut everything out.

"Mother, please! I'll have you know that Hel, back when we first knew her, sicced her vicious wolf on us? Don't you remember me telling you about that?"

"Was that so?"

"...I can explain—"

"Haha! Mother dear, I'm only joking. Hel got along very well with all of us, from the very beginning. Right?"

One of the young noble girls who I shared a classroom with for six years has a rather *forceful* smile on her face right now.

...Here we go. Noble girls, ugh.

I am at a table with relatively high-ranking nobles, thanks to the fact that Maris is sitting next to me. I'm trying to recall every bit of etiquette I ever heard about and staying out of her way as much as possible.

Still, I am doing better than he is.

I know several of the people up and down the table, so I'm not too nervous. A bit of light teasing and intimidation feels practically nostalgic, really.

But then we have Satanás.

"Oho! A friend of Alois, aren't you?"

"Yessir."

"Alois just told me that you get along well with my son Zenon as well, hmm?"

"Yessir."

"He also said you were a sorcerer. Tell me, how's the situation—"

"Yessir."

Woe unto us all. Satanás is sitting in the chair closest to the royal family.

* * * *

The night goes on.

"Yessir."

My poor friend Satanás has, as far as I can tell, not moved an inch the entire night.

He probably doesn't want to look flustered in front of Prince Zenon, but he doesn't seem to realize that the whole serious act he's putting on right now isn't effective at hiding his nerves in the slightest.

It's not like I can see everything that happens from where I'm sitting, but I bet that right now, Prince Zenon is watching Satanás and laughing to himself. No doubt about that. He's always the one making fun of everyone else, so it's kinda nice to be able to sit back, relax, and enjoy seeing him freeze up in discomfort for once.

“Oh, by the way—have you decided to whom you shall give your couplet flower?”

“I’m planning on giving it to a friend.”

“Well now, isn’t that just lovely.”

As Lady Halmagyi asks me about my flower (or at least, I believe that’s her name—that’s what Maris called her, at least), I brush my fingers against the metal of my necklace.

I wonder, what time is it right now...?

The window, which had been shattered by the demon earlier, is now back to normal. I can see the light of the stars above the Royal Isle shining through the windows. It’s not quite the middle of the night...but I don’t know any more than that. *Up here, off the ground, my sense of time isn’t as good as it usually is.*

I’ve been sitting here eating all the while, so my stomach hasn’t growled once, fortunately. It’s not like I’ve been satisfied by the *amount* of food being served to me—it’s more that inside these walls is an excellent chef, who is selecting the most excellent ingredients, all in order to create cuisine *par excellence*, the taste of which satisfies me completely.

Delicious, really. That’s all there is to say about this feast.

I decide to give my stomach a bit of a break and look up at the ceiling. Compared to when I’d first arrived in the hall, I can see that the painting of the sun is slowly disappearing as time goes on, while the painting of the moon is growing more vibrant.

“Awesome,” I whisper under my breath, honestly impressed by the effect.

The Lady sitting next to me hears me. “Good heavens, dear, is this your first time seeing something like this?” She smiles a bit as she looks at me. According to her, the paintings function as a sort of clock, so that when the sun is entirely gone, we will know that it is midnight.

I’ve seen picture clocks in action before, of course, but never anything like this. I’d like to stay here the whole night, watching it every moment as the picture slowly fades away.

“No, I’ve never seen anything like it. In fact, I’d be quite content to simply stare at it the rest of the night,” I say in reply to the Lady’s question.

“Oh, what a cute thing to say!” She laughs, sincerely enjoying my own enjoyment. Her daughter, however, reacts in precisely the way I’d expect a noble girl to react.

“Hahaha! Hel knows nothing of *shame*, Mother. That’s why she’s so fun to watch!”

I know she’s not complimenting me. But neither do I feel like she is intentionally trying to insult me.

“Lady Hel, might I have a moment?”

“Lady Hel.”

For a good long minute, I try to figure out who’s being addressed here, before realizing that someone is trying to talk to *me*. I turn around in the direction of the voice.

Behind me, where there had been a servant taking my empty plates and replacing them with full ones, stands someone else I don’t recognize.

“...Pardon me?”

I never dreamed that one of the palace servants would refer to me as “Lady.” You’ll forgive me if my reaction was a bit delayed, won’t you?

Even the servant has a wry smile on her face when she sees my confusion. My dismay at failing to respond immediately, however, must be easily apparent. “Sorry for not realizing sooner,” I say, but the servant instantly shakes her head to dismiss my apology. “No trouble at all, my lady.”

“Umm...” I say, “you needed me for something?”

I don’t even have a name tag on, but she somehow knew what to call me anyway.

I’ve fixed my posture so I don’t look like a slouch, when I feel the eyes of the people around me beginning to look my way. I point at myself one more time, just to *really* make sure it’s me the servant was referring to.

Maris has been paying attention to what's been going on. "Might you have some business with my friend here?"

"Lady Hel, please allow me to escort you to that seat over there."

"That seat"? What is she talking about?

I squint as I look in the direction she's pointing.

"...Isn't that...?"

The servant woman, who's dressed all in black for the evening, is, if I'm not mistaken, indicating the very table where Satanás, Rockmann, Prince Zenon, the King, and the rest of the royal family are sitting. I can also see the Queen, the Crown Prince, the second Prince, Duke Rockmann, and the Premier all sitting nearby as well—or rather, they are sitting at the exact same table. I can also see that the expression on Satanás's face has changed not one bit. *I've always had good eyesight, fortunately enough for times like this.*

They can't really want me over there, right? I quietly whisper to the servant. "Are you referring to where the King and the Duke are sitting...?" To my consternation, she nods "yes" and gives me a smile. Her eyes seem kind enough, but I am not so moved by her kindness that I feel compelled to go over to *that* table without complaint.

There's got to be something wrong here, right? Someone messed up. In all my eighteen years of life, this has got to be one of the three strangest things someone's ever asked me to do. Scratch that—this is definitely the strangest thing someone's ever asked me to do.

Why do they want me over there in the first place? While I sit silently, shaking my head slightly from side to side in disbelief, Maris inquires about the situation to the servant, who tells her that the *King himself* has called me over to his table.

Me? Out of all the millions and thousands of subjects he has? A commoner? Who he's never met? And he's calling me by name? What in the world is going on here?

"The King wants to see Hel?"

“The King called for Nanalie? Whatever might he want, I wonder? With the demon barging in and all, we weren’t able to make our greetings, though, so perhaps he wants to make up for that.”

“Lady Hel, please—this way.” The gentle, pretty servant steps up to stand directly beside my chair and proffers her hand to help me out of my seat. “If you would?”

I honestly have *no* idea what he could possibly want from me, but there’s no telling what people will whisper if I act like going over there and talking to the *King* is some unpleasant ordeal. I force a smile onto my face and nod slightly, wiping any trace of worry from my expression.

Maris and the other noble girls look concerned at how long I’m taking to get out of my seat. *Not that this has anything to do with them!* Lady Halmagyi pats my shoulder, saying, “It’s nothing to fear, child! Go on now, it’s quite alright.”

“Yes ma’am.”

Well, I can’t just sit here bewildered all night long. I hop out of my seat, feeling a bit unsteady as I try to stand—but Maris steadies me with her hand.

This is exactly why I don’t like wearing high heels or long dresses. They’re impossible to walk in, and it’s incredibly difficult to maintain one’s sense of balance. They are, however, both items that Maris made special for me...so I guess I should get better at wearing them. I feel a bit better knowing I have these lovely clothes on to go and see the King.

“Thanks,” I say to Maris.

“Take care,” she says, her face now filled with a different sort of concern than before. The servant leads me away, and so I go, approaching the royal table.

The conversations at the tables where other nobles are sitting seem to become more lively as I walk by, and I think I hear something like laughter as well.

* * * *

A servant brings me over to the table where the top-ranking VIPs in this whole room full of aristocrats are sitting. Among them, with hair black as Prince

Zenon's and sharp, strong eyebrows is the King of Doran, Zerolight Bal Atterga Doran. Next to him sits the beautiful Queen with pale gold hair, Marte Bal Orzman Doran.

"Naru Satanás was just telling us something rather interesting: the magic Circle of Exorcism we all saw earlier had been cast by one of his friends—you."

Just moments ago, I could not have possibly imagined what I am now doing: kneeling before the King and Queen, about to sit down at their table. My stomach had been growling, eager for food as we sat down to eat—but right now it feels as though the dinner started yesterday, or rather, several years ago, with how slowly time seems to be passing.

The people sitting at this table, nobles among nobles, are too brilliant to look upon directly. Each of them have this halo of capital-R Royalty about them that is positively blinding. Surely they couldn't have actually intended for little old me to come sit with them, right...? I look around the table once more. *Goddess, please, let this be over quickly. Being stared at by aristocrats is bad enough, but these stares from the royal family are nigh unbearable.*

"You may return to your post." The King waves his hand in the direction of the servant who brought me over to the table, and, quietly, she steps away from my side and goes back to her work serving food.

Wait up, Miss! Don't leave me here alone. It's not like I actually know her personally or anything, but I had felt a good deal more relaxed with her at my side. I watch her head back towards the kitchens.

She's gone. My hands suddenly start shaking, so I interlace my fingers and press them gently against my lower stomach. *Relax, Nanalie.* I'm so nervous I can barely breathe. *I'm sorry, Satanás. I shouldn't have made fun of you earlier.*

"Lady Barossa, this ragú is divine!"

"It's a rather complex burst of flavors, don't you agree? Fresh and lively. Reminds one of youth, yes?"

"Ah, but it is the fruit that has ripened to its full flavor that is even more heavenly, my lady. I prefer not the 'fresh' or 'lively' flavors of simple youth, but the deep body of more mature delicacies, if you catch my meaning."

“Oh goodness, Sir Alois! My husband is right here with us, you know.”

Ugh, I hate that he gets to see me all nervous like this, while he’s just stuffing his cool, calm face with his “heavenly” foods. Rockmann’s sitting next to a Lady, looking as though he’s having a grand old time. Since he’s still technically on guard duty, I am somewhat surprised to see him here, relaxing and eating like this, but he’s paying absolutely no attention to me as I stand near the King.

Not that I particularly mind being ignored by him. To be honest, I’d rather he’d not look at me at all—for the rest of his life, actually. *In fact, Rockmann, you really should stop flirting with that married lady—her husband sitting across the table looks as though he’s about to burst into tears.*

“He told me that you wanted to introduce yourself to the King—me, in other words. Now then, join us! Sit over there.” The King points at a seat next to Satanás and Rockmann. The tablecloth draped over the dining table is white, so painfully bright that I have to squint. The three delicate tines on the silver forks are as pointed as phoenix talons, while the cups are thin, round vessels resembling golden drops of morning dew. My cup is, at some point, filled with a purple liquor, whose vapor tempts my nose with whiffs of something supernatural.

After I sit down, I give Satanás, sitting next to me, a quick glare.

“Satanaaaaaaaaaaaaaas...” I quietly growl at him.

“.....” No answer.

You damn bastard, quit running your mouth about me, would you? I take back my apology. You are a complete idiot. At what point did I say that I wanted to “introduce myself” to the King?! Pretty bold lie, even for a scoundrel like you.

Satanás is acting as though he cannot sense my gaze at all, and merely blows his nose. Rockmann, sitting on the other side of him, doesn’t appear to notice my irritation.

What’s the deal with Satanás? Surely he can at least acknowledge that I’m here, right? Maybe he feels bad for putting me into this position, or something. Based on the way he’s acting, though, it doesn’t seem like he was trying to rile me up by having the King call me over. He actually looks more relaxed than he

did before. “Birds of a feather flock together,” right? His only other “friend” here is Rockmann, after all.

Still. For all the awkwardness I’m going through right now, I wish all that overly-gelled silver hair on his head would fall right out, right now, in front of everyone.

“Miss Nanalie Hel, yes? That was a lovely magic circle earlier.”

“I am honored to hear you say so, Your Highness.”

The King interrupts my train of thought as I sit here stewing in my resentment for my “good friend” Satanás. He calls me by name—my full name, at that—before I’ve had the chance to introduce myself. Satanás must’ve told him my name before I came over.

Having the King himself know and call me by name sets me quivering even more than I was before.

“The staff you wield is similar to Alois’s, is it not? Perhaps it is the same type, even?”

“Why, I wonder if that’s so? I’m not well versed on the finer points of magical instruments, so I’m afraid I can’t quite say...sir.”

I surreptitiously slip my hand under the table to pat my right thigh, where the Cudgel of the Goddess is fixed in its strap under my dress. Right as I’m about to tell him more about the *Dare Labdos*, the King waves away my explanation. “Ah, sorry, I didn’t realize,” he says, and then changes the subject to something else entirely, going on about magic circles.

I’ve no idea why he just apologized to me, but I’m glad I don’t have to talk about that anymore.

“That circle looked a great deal like an exorcism circle I once saw in a school textbook. I remember the circle being quite complex. For your staff to have created a circle that large, why, it’s a sign of just how much magical ability you have. You truly are a most excellent witch.”

His words make me feel uneasy. All I did was produce a magic circle, once—why’s he going on like this, talking about what an “excellent witch” I am? Not

even my parents talk about me like that. I look down at my hands, fidgeting a bit out of embarrassment.

It is, of course, a nice thing to be praised by other people. There's no greater honor than to be complimented by His Highness the King himself. But there are people—friends and enemies alike—who are much more “excellent” than I am. The compliment doesn't sit right with me, knowing who I know.

“You were also a great help with that business with Alois as well, weren't you? Michael told me all about it.”

Ooooh. Now I feel a whole lot more uncomfortable. I look up to see how everyone else interprets his words. “That business with Rockmann” is clearly referring to what happened at the masquerade, back when I was pretending to be that somewhat over-the-top “Lady Butterfly.”

Just remembering that night makes me blush. It's definitely going to go down in history as one of the more embarrassing nights of my life. If I could, I'd very much like to wipe the memory from my mind entirely.

““That business with Alois'? Father, what are you talking about?”

I'm over here cringing to myself at the mere mention of that night while next-in-line to the throne, Crown Prince Arman, looks over at his father with suspicion written across his expression.

“Were you...” He turns to me. “Is he saying that you, too, fell head-over-heels for Alois?”

“Oh no, nothing like that.”

‘You too’? What’s that supposed to mean?

This is my first time seeing the royal family up close like this, but they're talking to me like we're old acquaintances. They don't actually care about my romantic interests...do they? The Crown Prince is waiting patiently for me to elaborate. *As if I'd ever fall for him!* I try imagining myself being all lovey-dovey over Rockmann. Nope. Can't. I cringe even further at the very idea of liking him in that way.

“Haha, I'm only joking. Of course you wouldn't want to talk about something

like that in a place like this. A witch like you, well, you're not that easy to win over, right?" The Crown Prince had only been joking with me. Apparently.

"Hahaha!" He laughs, and I, who have no idea what the appropriate reaction is in a situation like this, merely "hahaha" as well.

"A witch like me?" What is he trying to imply by that? I don't think I've laughed this awkwardly in a long time. The last time was when Professor Bordon made some lame dad-joke in class, I think.

"Nanalie, don't be so tense. My brother makes jokes like that around every girl he meets, so don't take it personally."

"Prince Zenon..."

"Hey, bro, when you put it like that, you make it sound like I'm some unchivalrous flirt!"

"Well, you are, aren't you? For an engaged man, you certainly—"

"Zenon, you've always been a bit stiff! You gotta limber up, yeah? Let me give you a massage."

Prince Zenon, who's sitting across from me, had tried to save me from an awkward conversation with his brother—but found himself entangled in a sibling spat as a result.

Well, thankfully we've moved on from yet another problematic subject, so let's just be quiet and see if we can't talk about something less...sensitive. I let my gaze wander up and down the table. Each member of the royal family really does have that face, and it's so...perfect. Do you have to look like that to be a ruler?

The Crown Prince has a beard of a somewhat lighter color than that of his father, the King's, and it looks like he gets his facial features more from his mother rather than him. The Queen herself has hair more white than gold, so it really does look like their characteristics were mixed together quite evenly in their first son. Prince Zenon, however, is the only one of the children that has that same sharp set to his gaze as his father—the Crown Prince's eyes are much softer.

“Ah, dear brothers of mine, at it again! Brother Arman, please, do try to be an adult, sometimes at least.”

“Mislina, you taking Zenon’s side again?”

“Why of course! Brother Zenon is my ideal husband, you know. Brother Nortis cannot possibly understand why, I’m sure.”

Second in line to the throne, Prince Nortis, looks even more like his mother the Queen, as he’s the only one of the royal children with blond hair. He has it cut quite short, however, shorter than any of his brothers, so his silhouette is the sharpest and most well-defined. He’s also rather muscular. At first glance, he looks more like the Knight Commander than a royal.

“You told me that Alois was your ‘ideal husband.’ Don’t just call someone your ‘ideal husband’ on a whim, got it?”

“What’s wrong with saying I like the things I like? Brother Nortis, I do believe you’re jealous.”

“Mislina...there you go again.”

Both Princess Mislina and Crown Prince Arman have that same aura about them, and out of the four siblings bear the strongest resemblance to each other. Her long hair, which likely stretches all the way down to her waist, is right now tied up into a tight bun, and on top of her head rests a golden tiara. Framing her dark eyes are her thick eyelashes that flutter gently every time she blinks.

Prince Zenon had, at some point, told me his little sister was so cute that he couldn’t help but brag about her to all of his friends. Now that I’ve seen her in person, I suppose I can understand why he said that. Her personality seems a bit grating, but straightforward. A little sister to dote upon would be cute regardless of how she acts, I suppose. Until tonight, I’d never seen Rockmann’s older brother or his Lady mother either, but they are, of course, as beautiful as the rest, with that royal blood of theirs.

“Is that what happened with ‘that business with Alois’?! Good grief darling, don’t treat these children like they’re your playthings.”

“Oh, come now, don’t be so cross with me.”

The King's just finished explaining what happened at the masquerade, and the Queen has folded her arms. She looks distinctly peeved to hear the details of how Rockmann and I were manipulated that night. Her pale, translucent blue eyes are fixed upon the King's face, looking as though she is attempting to pierce his visage with her gaze.

Despite the fact that we are all here talking about him, Rockmann is showing not the slightest interest in joining in on our conversation.

"But setting that matter aside, Miss Nanalie Hel—Harré must be full of wonderful people like yourself, no?"

The King changes the subject in an attempt to distract the Queen from her displeasure. He's the King of an entire realm, but even he relies on such basic methods in his attempts to escape from the wrath of his wife.

Hold on, I didn't tell him I work at Harré. How'd he find that out?

The King must have picked up on my surprise, because the very next moment he tells me that he "heard from Michael" about my situation. I glance over at Duke Rockmann, who says nothing, but smiles. *Nobles can all make that same, knowing smile. It's kinda sus, if you ask me.* If I could have my way, I'd like to pull the King aside right now and have an in-depth discussion about how his family should be more discreet with information concerning the personal lives of his subjects. I don't have the guts to ask him for a private audience concerning that, of course.

Next to me, Premier Markin lifts a finger as though he's just thought of something.

"Isn't there a fellow named 'Alkes' over at Harré? Former Vice Commander of the Order? A commoner, but even so, a supremely talented person."

"Captain Carlos of the Second Platoon was born in a commoner family as well."

"Ah, if only that regretful incident could've been avoided, I'm sure that both of them—"

Duke Rockmann coughs. "Premier Markin," he says, interrupting him.

The Premier lowers his eyes and frowns. “Ah, my apologies.” Had he just been about to say something...improper?

He’d been talking completely normally, but something about that “regretful incident” must have not been meant for commoner ears like my own. But more interesting to me had been the Premier mentioning the name “Alkes.”

I wonder if he’d been referring to Harré’s own Mr. Alkes? If so—I have no proof that he’d been talking about the Mr. Alkes I know, but if he had—it would make sense why the Knight Commander speaks to him so politely every time he sees him, considering that Mr. Alkes had been the former Vice Commander. Presumably.

Mr. Alkes is a little older than the Commander, so it would make sense if the Commander had been his subordinate back when Mr. Alkes was Vice Commander. It would also explain why Mr. Alkes was so gifted and knowledgeable a mage—if he had been high up on the Order hierarchy, he would’ve had extensive experience fighting with magic.

“Carlos” must have been referring to another male employee at Harré, a man older than Mr. Alkes. I’ve heard rumors that he too is a former Knight, and for his name to come up in conversation like this must mean that those rumors are true.

“I’ve spoken with Director Theodora Locktiss several times as well. She is a truly brilliant woman. I am quite proud that Doran is honored to have someone like her serving the public like she does.”

“She was chosen as one of the ‘Top One Hundred Sublime Mages of the Modern Age,’ after all.”

“Markin, you were on the selection committee for the Hundred, weren’t you? Did you put in your vote for Locktiss?”

“No, I nominated Borizurie from neighboring Vestanu. I knew Locktiss would be selected even without my help.”

Just what I’d expect from our Director Locktiss: all of the most important people in the Kingdom are talking about her, even though she’s not in the room.

The reason Director Locktiss is so well known amongst the nobles is due to her involvement in the Black Pegasus murders ten years earlier, when one of the Knights killed a mage and set off a whole series of events culminating in Director Locktiss saving the world, basically (or so I've been told). She'd been just a regular employee working at Harré at the time.

The "Pegasus" part of the name referred to the magical animals the Knights rode, and the "Black" part referred to the color of their uniforms. Before the whole thing happened, members of the Order were commonly referred to as the "Black Pegasi," but since that fateful incident and the sheer cruelty of the violence that had occurred, the term had lost its neutral nuance and was used more as a slur against the Knights.

It had all happened when I was seven or eight years old. The details of the incident had been inappropriate for children to hear about, apparently—not a single adult ever told me exactly what happened.

Curious child that I was, I of course wanted to know more, but as time passed, my interest waned, and all I know is that "something happened" back then, and not a whole lot else. I've no idea why the Director, who hadn't even been a sorcerer, had become the "savior of Doran" at the time of the incident.

If I looked into the library inside Harré I'd probably find some answers, but regardless of the details, Director Locktiss is certainly a good person to look up to.

"As long as Borizurie is in Vestanu, they will have peace, of that I'm sure."

While everyone around me is talking about the Director, I suddenly realize something rather strange: we'd all just gone through a demon attack, but there's not a single person at this table even so much as obliquely referencing the whole ordeal. The most anyone has talked about what happened so far was the King's compliment of my magic, but neither he nor anyone else have mentioned the subject any further.

I suppose they'd prefer not to talk about that sort of thing in front of a low-born commoner like myself. Still, it's weird. How can they sit here so calmly and happily, eating this feast, despite the battle we all just went through? I ponder on the matter silently for a moment. Perhaps for the royal family, demon

attacks really are just an everyday occurrence. Or something.

“Well now, isn’t that a lovely necklace!”

“Oh, this? It’s something I got from my mother.”

The Premier, who had just been talking with the King, strokes his mustache as he looks down at my neck.

“I see, from your mother? Mothers truly are wonderful creatures. No matter how old you are, they truly are lovely to have around.”

“My mother is an archaeologist, and sometimes she sends me antiques she finds at work. This is one of those finds she made. Right now, I have a small couplet flower inside the locket here.”

“Meant for someone?”

“Yes, sir. I’m going to give it to my friend.”

“Ah, is that so!” He claps his hands together in admiration. “Even more beautiful is this lovely color of hair you have! Did you dye it with magic?”

Premier Markin speaks to me about one thing after another, always with a friendly, happy smile on his face. He asks me so many questions I hardly have any time to feel nervous, and the more we talk, the more relaxed I become.

“No, sir. It used to be dark brown, but when I learned my magic type, it turned this color.”

“Oho, I’ve heard that happens sometimes. It’s said that those who go through that have great magical ability. There’s no definite proof for that idea, but you do indeed seem to have more ability than the average person, that’s for sure.”

The more magical ability one has, the more likely it is that the spells one tries to cast will be successful. You can’t just look at someone and sense their ability level, or feel it when you touch their skin or anything else like that, but powerful mages are said to be “gifted with great ability.”

“What types are your parents?”

“My father’s Fire. My mother...I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

“She told me she doesn’t do sigil magic, so she doesn’t need to know her type. She doesn’t have a familiar either, and she says she’s fine with basic combat magic.”

I don’t know my mother’s magic type. My mother herself doesn’t seem to have much interest in knowing what her own type is, for that matter. I once asked my father if he found this lack of interest on my mother’s part odd, and he told me that he “really really!” wanted to know. Thinking about this brings back memories of my father, middle-aged and all, jumping up and down as he said this.

After a while, he’d also said something like, “I’ve always been into mysterious women, you know...like Mimilie...” I’d understood very little of that remark, and he’d gone on muttering to himself, looking out the window like he was daydreaming or something. As long as he and Mom are happy with the situation, I guess there’s no reason for me to worry about her type.

It’s not like not knowing my mother’s magic type inconveniences me in my everyday life. That said, one’s magic type is said to be a highly heritable trait, so perhaps my mother is an Ice-Type, just like me.

“Among commoners, it’s rather common not to know one’s type, is it not? Still, for an archaeologist not to find her own identity worth investigating—now that’s rather curious, don’t you think? Anyhow, what’s your type?”

The Premier pushes up his glasses a little and smiles as he asks me this.

“Oh, right, I’m—”

Ice-Type. Or so I nearly blurted out.

Yikes, that was close.

Wait—actually, maybe it’s alright to tell him?

Here at the table sits the King and other VIPs of the Kingdom. Most of them probably already know that I’m an Ice Mage, right?

“Sorry about that,” I say. “My type is—oooh...huh?”

My vision suddenly blurs.

My body...doesn’t feel right. I feel like I’m about to throw up. It’s like

someone is grabbing my head and shaking it from side to side, that's how dizzy I am. I feel as bad as the first time I got drunk.

I lay my elbows down and rest my forehead on the table.

"Whatever is the matter?"

"Hey, Nanalie, what's up?"

The Premier and Prince Zenon are both stretching their hands out to me in concern from across the table. For having just met him, the Premier sure is nice, but I'm glad I have a good friend like Prince Zenon in my life.

...As if I have time to be thinking about the joys of friendship!!

At the same time that my vision had started blurring, I'd heard a ringing in my ears. With the nausea, the dizziness, and the strange shaky feeling all over my body—I wonder—I'm losing grip on consciousness, but I try snapping my fingers to test my theory before the world grows too dark. For a second, I feel better, but then I'm back to spinning inside myself, falling further and further away from the world in front of me.

I knew it. You can't fool me. The temporary reprieve following the snap had proven it: someone's casting a spell on me.

"You alright? Your face is the same color as a demon's."

Whoa there, Rockmann. What're you trying to imply?

Not only is he just now deciding to acknowledge my presence at the table, he's also making fun of me, from what it sounds like.

"This—this is—a healing spell won't—"

I don't want him getting all concerned about me. I know what the problem is: someone's casting a Confusion Hex on me. A healing spell isn't going to work in a situation like this. It's a spell meant to corrupt the senses of the target, so they can't tell up from down, causing their vision to spin round and round. Chaos.

I don't know who's hexing me, but I don't want to cause a fuss right here in front of the royals, so I grit my teeth and try to hold it together. Professor Bordon had always told me that "at least when it comes to grit, Hel, you've got

more grit than anyone else here, that's for sure." I'd asked him if simple "grit" could overcome an opponent's spells, though, and he'd told me "no." Sure, grit isn't enough all by itself, but it is helping to keep me conscious. *Who the hell is this hexing bastard? What'd I ever do to them?*

If I could just negate the hex—but I can't. At least, not by myself, and that fact is the most frustrating part of this situation. No matter how many compliments I got earlier, not being able to protect myself from an attack like this is embarrassing. It's just a Confusion Hex!

"Goodness, the girl's in quite a state. Perhaps the liquor didn't agree with her."

"Father, since it doesn't appear to be poison, could we just allow her to rest in a palace guest suite?"

"Yes, that would be best."

I'm trying to keep myself up with every last bit of strength that I have, but I'm about to fall out of my seat from dizziness. Someone grabs my shoulders, though, so I don't fall. Next to me is Satanás—he probably held me up. I can't hear anything going on around me. I don't have the energy to care about who's touching me at the moment.

Since I can't snap my fingers, I have to use an incantation to dispel the effects. I immediately try forming words with my mouth, but my lips and tongue don't cooperate and I'm unable to so much as whisper a fragment of the spell.

Dammit! Isn't there some other way? I'm being tested in my abilities as a mage right now, aren't I?

I'm unable to move any part of my body at all—but even so, I am moving, or more precisely, floating through the air, limply, like some old towel being carried outside for laundry. My hands are waving through the air. Ahhhh... It's like I've turned into one big seaweed plant, tendrils twisting this way and that in the currents of the deep, blue ocean...

I bet I look fabulously shameful to everyone around me, hanging in the air like this.

"Why, bless my stars! Nanalie dear, pull it together!"

That's Maris. Maybe it's Maris who held me up, not Satanás. Even though she'd been sitting halfway across the room at the time.

My vision has completely clouded over. It's like I'm inside a raging sandstorm, alone. I've no idea where I'm being taken or what's going on around me. Once more, I try snapping my fingers—but I can't summon the energy needed to even twitch my thumb.

Damn you. I'll hex you twice over for this, whoever you are. Once I learn your identity, O Mysterious Caster, I shall curse you and all your children, grandchildren, and every other future generation that carries your blood, in perpetuity. You shall all be cursed to have the absolute smelliest of feet. Your grandchildren's grandchildren shall know my vengeance.

Well, maybe cursing all your children and grandchildren is kinda harsh. I guess I'll limit myself to making sure you have smelly feet.

"I'm gonna have her sleep in one of the palace guest rooms. Don't worry about her."

"But..."

From somewhere very close by, I hear what sounds like Rockmann's voice. My body feels as though it's hanging over his shoulder, and he's got one arm around my waist. Just like you'd carry a basket of laundry on your shoulder as you pull down the dried items from the line outside. *I'm literally being "objectified" right now, aren't I?*

Ooooh, I don't want to think about that anymore. I don't want to think about anything. My head hurts.

"I'll give her some medicine, and when she wakes up, she'll be fine. More importantly, Maris—a radiant lady like yourself likely already has a partner for the dance tonight, but if by some miracle you don't have a partner, what do you say to dancing the first song of the night with me?"

"Uhhhhhhh what? ...Yes? Yes! Yes, of course! Please, hurry up and go drop off Nanalie so we can get to dancing, okay?"

Jeez, Maris. You really gotta sell me out like that? Or should I say, throw me out?

Her mind must be filled with thoughts of the ball that's about to start. It's sad to hear her sounding desperate for affection like that, but she's so honest about her attraction to Rockmann that rather than irritating, it comes off as rather endearing.

And, setting her aside—did Rockmann just ask a girl to dance with him while carrying another girl around on his shoulder?! Unbelievable. He's practically demonic!

"You...demon..."

"Demon?"

"Oho, she must be hallucinating," or so I hear the King say to Rockmann. "Hurry along and take her to a guest room."

Ugh, just trying to process words right now is hurting my brain.

I can only sort of hear what Rockmann says in reply to the King. If I try concentrating any harder, I'm definitely going to throw up.

And then, the next moment: consciousness slips away from me, and I fall into pure darkness.

* * * *

After Nanalie lost consciousness, her entire body went limp. She weighed down more heavily on Alois's shoulder.

Her unbound hair rubbed against Alois's cheek and spilled down to his chest. Alois, who'd realized Nanalie had lost consciousness, left the table as the King had ordered, smoothed out the ruffles on his Knight's uniform with one hand, then slipped one side of his long, blond hair behind his ear.

Strands of someone else's hair kept rubbing against his face. He gently pushed away those differently-colored hairs.

"Will she be alright...?"

Maris, who he'd tried to calm by telling her that Nanalie would be fine, seemed to be worried sick herself. Nanalie hadn't told Maris she was feeling ill at all, so for her to have collapsed so suddenly like this had caused her to clasp both hands together in prayer as she watched her friend's still form draped

over Alois's shoulder. Nobles from the other tables had also noticed something was going on, and were staring at him as he slowly carried her away.

"I'll go too." Zenon stood up to accompany Alois.

Satanás, now alone at the table for royals, watched the two of them begin to leave. "Come with us," Alois said, calling out to him.

"Hey, Alois—can't you just let a servant take care of her or something?"

"Mislina, come on—"

"But Brother Zenon, she's not someone you need to go out of your way to help! It's the servant's job to take care of people like that."

The instant Alois heard her words he stopped, turned around, and spoke in a voice loud enough for the whole table to hear. "Careful now, Princess. I'll have you know that this person here is an Ice-Type."

Alois said this gently, with a smile, but the Premier and several of the other aristocrats tensed up at his words. There wasn't a single person in the room who didn't know what was going on with Ice-Type witches, after all. They, who clearly hadn't imagined that Nanalie was one those witches, turned their eyes away from Alois to look at her sleeping face.



“We’ve instructed all of the Ice Mages in the Kingdom to hide their true type. We’ve also instructed them to report anyone who asks them what type they are, no matter how casually. Please do not speak of these matters beyond this hall. Should you fail to keep your silence about the lady on my shoulder, it’s quite possible you may be suspected to be a spy from Orcinus.”

Satanás raised one eyebrow at this speech from Alois.

Didn’t he just tell literally everyone in this room that his friend—my friend—is an Ice Witch, and then warned them against telling anyone else? Isn’t that a bit contradictory? he thought.

“Markin, you spoke to her too much,” King Zerolight said, nodding his head at Alois’s warning. “Let us all be vigilant against those who threaten our Ice Mages.” He placed one hand against his chest, saying to Alois, “Thank you for the reminder.”

Alois nodded and said, “The Knights of the First Platoon have cast guarding spells over every Ice Mage, so that any curse cast upon them will reflect upon the caster. This one, however,” he said, tilting his head towards Nanalie, “has the tendency to break any protective spells we put upon her, so we need to be extra careful around her.”

“Oho,” the King said. “Why might that be?”

“The fact is, she’s extremely sensitive to any spell cast upon her, even healing spells. Without even consciously being aware of doing so, she snaps her fingers to lift the spell the instant she senses it.” Alois glanced around the room once more, to meet the eyes of all those still watching.

“So that’s why I must ask you,” he said, “please do not attempt to cast a spell on her.”

His voice was gentle as ever, but his eyes, his crimson eyes, were narrowed and glowing sharply with the true intensity of his emotions in that moment.

* * * *

Down the hallway walked three young men, one with a woman over his shoulder.

Posted at regular intervals down the hallway were castle guards, the White Knights. Whenever they realized that among the men was Zenon, each of them, without fail, bowed deeply.

Upon arriving at a palace guest room, Zenon opened the doors and invited Alois and Satanás inside. The room was adorned with green wallpaper and had a large square window hidden by a red curtain. Covering almost every inch of the walls of the room were fancy wooden bookshelves stuffed with books. Also inside the room was a glass pitcher of water sitting atop a small table, as well as a white-gold dressing table with a mirror atop it. The room, which looked to have been carefully arranged by the servants, was absolutely spotless. Not a speck of dirt or mote of dust was anywhere.

“You told us all to keep quiet, but then you blathered the secret to the whole room!”

The instant the door had closed, Satanás, who’d been just *itching* to say something about Alois’s earlier revelation back in the Great Hall, opened his mouth to voice his opinion. It sounded like he was making fun of him more than anything, but Zenon, who was likely imagining how the Knight Commander would’ve reacted, sounded quite serious when he said:

“You’re right, Satanás. But we need to have Hel become a delicious piece of bait for our quarry.”

“Huh? ‘Bait’?”

Satanás looked utterly confused as he raised his voice and tilted his head to one side.

Alois took Nanalie, who he was still carrying over his shoulder, over to the bed at the center of the room and carefully laid her down on her side. The smooth sheets creased in response to her weight, and the soft mattress embraced her sleeping form gently.

Alois let out a sigh of relief at the weight being lifted off his shoulder, and sat down in a wooden chair next to the bed. He laid his elbows on top of the sheets as if exhausted, and looked over at Nanalie, whom he’d put to sleep with his Confusion Hex.

He was impressed with how long she'd held out against the spell. A normal person would have lost consciousness almost instantly, and yet she'd resisted its effect for a good while.

"After that demon disappeared earlier, everywhere from here all the way to the other side of the sea smelled of magic. If we're going to find out what that thing really is, we're going to have to leave the Kingdom. But first we need to take care of this Orcinus business."

"Will you really be able to trace it?"

"Should His Highness feel like it, he can easily figure out where it went, you know. You could too, Satanás, if you put your mind to it."

"Well, I don't feel like doing that at all."

Three Ice Maidens had already disappeared in Doran. They had disappeared before the alert was sent out. They had been marked as "missing" at around the same time a number of others had vanished without a trace.

The First Platoon had tracked them all using psychometry, and all three of them had gone first to the Kingdom of Sheera, then to the Kingdom of Orcinus. Curiously enough, they hadn't been kidnapped: all of them had left Doran of their own accord.

What was unknown, however, was whether all three of them had coincidentally happened to feel like going on an international adventure at the same time, or whether they had been manipulated using magic.

Then there was the question of why Doran was on alert against Orcinus: it wasn't just the matter of these "kidnappings"—also, the Queen of Orcinus had been discovered to have been attempting to perform some awful *rite*, according to the secret investigations of the Seventh Platoon.

Were ten people to be told the details of what she was attempting to do, all ten of them would find themselves overcome with a desire to vomit at the horrid, grotesque plans she had for her captives.

Several people had already been taken out of Sheera, and there'd also been some who had consciously chosen to go to Orcinus. Once the alert had gone out, of course, no one had been allowed to leave Doran. It wasn't like the King

could declare war, however, without definitive proof that his subjects had been taken captive, nor could he begin negotiations for their release without revealing what he already knew. Doran simply hadn't had enough information to act upon at that point.

"Yuck, Rockmann—bait? Really? You're the bait..."

While the three of them were talking, Nanalie mumbled something in her sleep as she flipped over to her other side.

"Hahaha! Even asleep, she's a sharp one, isn't she? I don't think we need to worry about her being attacked." Alois laughed as though he had just seen something incredibly amusing.

Satanás, on the other hand, looked exasperated at how casually Alois was treating the situation. "Well actually, I think we *do* need to worry. When you said she was an Ice-Type, there was *one person* who seemed to react—suspiciously."

"Just as we expected," Alois said, nodding to himself.

"Did you have someone already in mind?" Zenon asked, holding one hand against his chin. "Are you saying that there's a traitor among those people back out there?"

"Who knows? If I had to say, I bet that any traitor out there right now is *itching* to get their hands on her. After all, that's how humans are, right? Tell someone they can't have something, and they want it all the more. It's like you and your feelings for Feltina."

"Shut up you idiot, that's *totally* different."

Satanás tried to get the conversation back on track. "But Nanalie's our friend, right? Can't we just come out and ask her, say, to 'be our bait'? Sure, that's an awful thing to ask a friend to do, but it's better than saying nothing and forcing her to do it anyway."

"I've never once thought of this foolish lady as a 'friend,' you know."

"Wow, you're awful. If Maris hears you talking like that, she'll hate your guts."

"Hmmm...that would be troubling."

Alois lifted his arms off the bed and stood up from the chair. He stepped over to where the pillows were, saw that Nanalie had her mouth slightly open, and laughed. There was a little bit of drool dripping out from the edge of her mouth.

Alois lifted up the silver necklace Nanalie was wearing and slipped open the locket with his thumb. With a *click* the hinges sprung open, and just as Nanalie had said earlier, inside was a couplet flower twisted into a ring.

“I don’t suppose you could try saying cuter things in your sleep, for once...?”

After he’d checked the inside of the locket and closed it back up, Alois blew gently on the chain of the necklace. Each breath he blew was gold.

* * * *

I awake the next morning to the sound of birds chirping.

I yawn, rub my eyes a little, then head over to the sink and brush my teeth like I always do, swishing around some water inside my mouth afterwards, then dabbing my lips with a towel. *Ah, wait, I have to wash my face, too.* I turn the faucet again, splash some water on my face, and feel refreshed and awake.

Now then, let’s get to making some breakfast. Once I walk into the kitchen, however, I glance up at the ceiling and become lost in thought.

“Hold on—how...?”

How did I get home last night?

And here I was, all excited about giving her this flower, only to pass out before I could do so... Whether it was because it had been in the dark for too long, or in too cramped a space, the flower inside my locket had withered to a dry, brown color. *All that work, gone to waste because of my carelessness!* I had sat on my bed for a good long while before work, hugging my knees against my chest, face beet-red with sad frustration. No amount of magic would return the couplet flower to its original vibrance. Realizing that made me feel even worse.

“Hello. Please, take a seat.”

“Hey there, Ms. Hel.”

A client has come up to my reception desk, so I snap out of my depressed reverie and fix my posture.

Focus, Nanalie, focus! I shake my head to rid myself of such sad thoughts and give the client a big, happy smile. It's none other than Mr. Petros, the pharmacist. I've often seen him around town when I'm out shopping, and he'd greet me whenever he noticed me walking by. We still haven't had anything approaching a full conversation, so we're just acquaintances, really. He's even so nice as to sometimes give me vegetables when we happen to meet. Because of that, I suppose, he's got this Boy-Next-Door vibe to him (although I'd never refer to him like that to anyone else, as he is definitely too old to be called a mere "boy").

From what I understand, he was born and raised in the western part of Doran, but he moved here because there was a better market for his skills.

"What sort of request might you wish to make today?"

"Well, the truth is, I've run into some trouble lately."

Mr. Petros showed me and Zozo a pane of glass.

"Is the issue with this glass?"

"Nah, that's not glass—it's a dragon scale."

"Dragon? Are you quite sure it came from a *dragon*?"

This scale's just as transparent as a piece of glass. It didn't have sharp corners but smooth, rounded edges, and was about as thick as the first joint on my forefinger. It's my first time seeing one, now that I think of it. We aren't actually sure whether there is a dragon living in Doran, technically speaking—twenty years ago, there was a sighting of a yellow dragon in the Margrell District, but that had been the end of it. Whether they still exist at all anywhere near our borders is unknown.

Why does he have the scale of such a rare creature?

"I got this from my father," he says before we have a chance to ask him, and then goes on to elaborate how his father had come to possess the item. "A long time ago, my father, who was also a pharmacist and sorcerer—an alchemist, in other words—learned that some injuries and illnesses could not be cured with healing magic, but *were* treatable using dragon scales. So he left the Kingdom, looking for a dragon. This is the last scale left from what he brought back."

“So that means you won’t be able to make any more of that special medicine once this is gone, right?”

It seems like Mr. Petros is in quite a pickle.

“Yeah, that’s right. Of course, I’d like to go myself and find another dragon if I could, but I’m not that good with magic... I don’t think I could hold my own against a demon, let alone a dragon. Bit embarrassing to tell you that,” he says, blushing and scratching the back of his head, averting his gaze a bit.

“But Mr. Petros, you have nothing to be embarrassed about at all! Everyone has things they’re good and bad at, and all the people around town sing your praises whenever I ask them about your medicines!”

From what I gather, all he needs are the *scales* of a dragon, so on top of the request form I write, in big letters: “**SEEKING DRAGON SCALES.**” Because we are only *looking* for this dangerous creature, not seeking to *kill* one, we don’t conduct a preliminary investigation, which means that the sorcerer who accepts this request will have to do so without knowing just how risky fulfilling it might be. The dragon the sorcerer finds might breathe fire, have sharp spikes on its body, or even possess a tail like that of a scorpion’s, ready to poison any adventurer it might encounter. *It’s impossible to say what they’ll find.* As a result, only highly experienced sorcerers will be offered this request.

There are three classes of sorcerers here at Harré: Associate, Trade, and Master. “Associates” are new, untested sorcerers, “Trades” are allowed to take on requests that are limited in the danger involved (they are allowed to take on simple demon exorcisms, however), while “Masters” are full-fledged *sorcerers* that are allowed to take on any request Harré may offer. They are also allowed to eat at the Harré canteen for free.

In order to progress up the ranks, the sorcerers have to fulfill a set number of requests: for every promotion, they have to complete at least ten dangerous requests, like ten demon exorcisms.

Benjamine and Satanás had (at some point) become Trades, and recently have been taking on more assignments that involve demons.

“We should limit this request to Masters, don’t you think?” I say to Ms. Zozo as I show her the form.

“Yes, I think so. ...Mr. Petros, we’ll be labeling this as ‘Masters-Only,’ is that alright?”

“Yeah. I know it’s a dangerous thing to ask for. I’d really rather only have those who can come back home in one piece take the job.”

Marking the request as “Masters-Only” does, of course, double the reward. “How does this amount look?”

He nods his head, smiling. “Looks great. With those scales, I’ll finally be able to work on medicines for the heart.”

“For the heart?”

“There are a lot of types of injuries and illnesses that can’t be fixed using magic, but the most troublesome are those that involve the heart. If you drink a dose of a normal medicine, by the time it reaches your heart, most of the magic has been absorbed by the blood, so it’s not very effective. Mix in some dragon scale, though, and the tiny crystals will retain the magic for a good deal longer than a liquid, so the medicine stays strong enough to have a real effect inside the heart. I hope I’ll be able to make some soon.”

I’m impressed by how knowledgeable and passionate he seems about his trade. *His medicine must be the best in town—no, the whole Kingdom!*

Every time I go out drinking, I make sure that I pass by his pharmacy so that I can purchase some of his hangover medicine. I’ve offered bottles to my co-workers after particularly heavy nights out together, and I’m sure it has saved them from a major headache the following day. *I’m pretty sure I even have five spare bottles in my room back at the dorm. Still, I should stop by and buy some more before I spend a night out at the bars again.*

“Alright then,” he says, nodding his head. “I hope that takes care of everything. Thanks for the help, you two.”

“Of course,” I say, smiling.

“We’ll be in touch,” Zozo says, waving to him as he walks back out the door.

After finalizing the form and sending it over to the sorcerer-receiving desks, Zozo and I go back to how we were before Mr. Petros came in. We haven’t had

many requests relating to demons lately, and the Season of Flowers will be over soon enough. I glance out the window and catch sight of another pegasus flying overhead.

Zozo wants to continue our conversation from earlier. “But let’s save that until the Director can join us for a little chat,” she says. “It might end up taking a while.” She winks at me, then changes the subject. “Oh, that’s right—Nanalie, have you decided to start, you know, ‘dressing up’ a little?”

“What do you mean?”

“That necklace—it’s pretty.” She points at the silver necklace around my neck.

“Well...to be honest, I can’t take it off.”

“Huh?”

“Um, I tried *yanking* it this morning, but even then, I couldn’t get the clasp to loosen.” The necklace is too tight to slip off over my head, and so I’d also tried *cutting* it off, but I don’t mention that. It’s rather irritating to be unable to remove it, considering the fact it feels hot against my skin from time to time.

Maybe I should have thought this through a bit more; my mother found this mysterious necklace in some far-off archaeological site. It might be cursed so that once worn, it can never be removed.

“Why don’t you try undoing the clasp?”

“It’s stuck. My mother got it for me in some far-off country, so maybe there’s some other way of removing it, but I have no idea what that might be.”

“You should ask your mother later, then. Having that on *all the time* would be quite inconvenient... I can’t imagine it’s very comfortable to sleep with that on.”

She’s right. Tomorrow, I’ll ask Mom what’s going on with this thing. If she tries to dodge the question by saying she “doesn’t know” how to remove it, I’ll graffiti her fancy vases, or something, until she tells me what the trick to getting it off is.

My pen, which I had used to sign the copy of the request form, is still lying out on my desk. I stick it back inside my light brown leather bag. *Anything else to clean up...? No...? Great, time to go.*

“Alright, I’m heading out.”

“Good work today! You’re stopping by the Director’s office before you leave, right? You do start doing reception for sorcerers tomorrow, after all.”

“Yes, I am!”

Tomorrow, I’m finally going to sit at *that desk*. I feel like I’m walking on Cloud Nine as I get up from my chair.

The Director had promised me that after spending a month in the Soreiyu District, I’d be able to start doing reception for sorcerers. She’d told me to stop by her office on my way out when she greeted me this morning. *It’s been nine months since I started working here, and Flower Season’s already halfway gone—but I’m getting done with my training much quicker than I thought I would. Rather impressive, if I do say so myself. Still, I can’t get so self-satisfied that I get ahead of myself and start making mistakes on the job.* I clap both hands against my cheeks to stay focused, trying to keep myself from grinning *too* widely.

* * * *

“Excuse me, Director Locktiss? ...Hmmm, maybe she isn’t here...?”

Upon entering the Director’s office, I see that it’s empty.

When she spoke to me this morning, she told me to wait in her office until she was back, so I resolve to stand in front of her desk until then. That wooden carving of a lynx is still on her desk, in exactly the same place it was last time I was in here. She must really like the thing, because on top of its head lies a white couplet flower. Well, artificial flower, I should say. It feels like it’s made of fabric. *Even our fearless Director has a taste for cutesy things. Not only that, but she’s beautiful, super cool, and is cute herself in a lot of different ways. Everyone knows that. Even the guys at Harré who tease her by calling her some “spinster” are just saying that because really, they like her. Not like they’d ever be able to start dating her or anything, with a man like the Knight Commander always around.*

“Did I keep you waiting?”

After a while alone in her office, I hear the door behind me swing open.

“Sorry for taking so long,” she says, walking past me to fumble with something on her desk. Her hair looks like a bit of a mess, indicating that she’s a bit frazzled. But it’s not only her hair that tells me how she’s feeling—her eyelids seem like they’re practically drooping with exhaustion.

She must be so incredibly busy with something, I think, worried. I probably shouldn’t ask what it is, though—I’m not like Ms. Harris or Mr. Alkes, I’m just a first-year employee.

“You’re finally getting started at the sorcerer desks tomorrow, right? Do your best, alright?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Here’s just a few papers you can use for reference on the job,” she says, handing me a notebook thicker than the width of my palm.

On the cover of the red notebook is something written in spiky Tekkru characters: “*Whose shadow do you walk in?*” Sheera, Doran, and a couple of other nearby Kingdoms use Tekkru characters in their writing. In order to open the notebook, I have to write the answer on the cover, below the question.

“Now, decide what your passcode will be,” the Director tells me.

I think carefully about something good to use. I walk in the shadow of...birds? No, trees...? No, those aren’t good...maybe my mother or my father? No, that’s too simple—oh, what about—

“Lala. My answer’s Lala.”

I summon up the image of my Blanc Lykos familiar and write her name across the cover.

“Finished?”

“That was kind of fun,” I say.

“Really? I’m glad you think so,” the Director says, looking out the window behind her chair. I follow her gaze to see that there are more pegasi outside.

There sure are quite a few pegasi flying around Harré. Must be a busy day for the Order. Come to think of it, I haven’t seen Nikeh in awhile—I should send her another letter. Even if I send her letters, though, she can’t find the time to meet

with me, it seems... Two months ago, I'd gone out to tea with Benjamine and Nikeh, but that had been the last time I'd seen either of them. *Must be difficult, being a Knight.* Nikeh had practically inhaled the cookies we enjoyed at our tea. Seeing her like that had made me a little concerned.

I wonder if she's on the pegasus flying up there right now...? I squint as I look to the west. The sun's setting, casting a red tint all across the landscape.

The Director is looking outside, the same as I had just been doing.

She'd told me earlier that she wanted to explain things to me about tomorrow, but for her to be silent for so long after passing me this notebook... I glance down at the red thing in my hands. *I guess she must be telling me to try figuring it out myself?* I look back up at her. *It doesn't seem like that's the message she intended to give me. If she tells me that I shouldn't keep bothering her about details for tomorrow, I'll head right out of here, but before that, I do want to thank her, for giving me this opportunity to be doing sorcerer reception sooner than I'd thought.*

"Um, Director Locktiss?"

"...Oh, yes? What's up?"

"It seems like you're a bit distracted at the moment, so..."

She turns around and blinks a few times, refocusing her gaze on my face before laughing a bit to herself. *Still looks tired, though, even with that smile.*

"It's just—being protected by someone you find so *irritating* is rather *irritating* in and of itself, don't you think?"

"Someone irritating"? What does she mean by that?

As I'm about to ask her if she's referring to the Knight Commander, a dim light glows above our heads, near the ceiling. I look up to see a small magic circle up there, and out from the middle of it falls a roll of paper tied with a thread. The Director catches the roll, opens it up, and runs her eyes across the message written on the paper.

I wonder what that's about. Who conjured that circle anyway?

"Finally," the Director sighs, looking visibly relieved. "Nanalie?"

“Yes, ma’am?”

“Just a few moments ago, the Queen of Orcinus passed away.”

...*Huh?*

“Huh?!”

“And so now I can finally tell you—”

What the Director tells me next is so surprising that I feel as though, while I’ve been living my everyday, happy-go-lucky life, someone has jumped out from behind the bushes and whacked me across the face with a frying pan.

The Great and Beautiful Water Witch, the Queen of Orcinus, Valentina Dal Bena Orcinus had, according to the secret plans of the three rulers of Kingdoms Sheera, Vestanu, and Doran, passed away from this life without the citizens of any of the four realms knowing *how* she had died.

Her passing is said to be due to illness, and her son the Crown Prince will immediately ascend to the throne of Orcinus in her place. Or so the Director tells me.

“Was she...killed?”

“Yes, she was.”

The Director leaves out some of the details, but goes on to describe how Queen Valentina had gathered together all of the Ice Witches from throughout her Kingdom into her court and then killed them all. It sounded as though she had been collecting *something* from all of the Ice Witches, but what that *something* was, the Director doesn’t elaborate on.

I’d heard that rumor from one of the Knights, about how the Queen of Orcinus had been “attempting to secure supplies of dragon blood and mermaid flesh in order to preserve her youth.” *Could she have also been trying to collect the still-warm blood of Ice Witches? ...What an awful thing to do. Stop it, Nanalie. You can’t accuse a Queen of trying to do such things! ...Let’s just stop thinking about that altogether.*

The Palace Guard, unable to refuse a direct order from the Queen due to the

spells placed upon them, had left Orcinus in search of more “Ice Maidens” to bring back to her.

No doubt that’s the reason why Ice Witches, already rare, have grown even less common in recent years.

“The Queen herself was a rather gifted mage, and she also had several loyal courtiers, so both of those factors made the whole operation rather difficult.”

One of those courtiers had apparently been skilled in shapeshifting, and had been detected sneaking into Castle Doran. The guards there apparently had a great deal of trouble trying to figure out who the imposter was, mainly because the shapeshifter hadn’t only been changing their appearance, but also assuming their memories, their manner of speaking, *even their magic type*. The mage had been so powerful that they had been able to deceive the “Song of Truth” spell designed to detect any intruder.

Not only that, but—

“They had discovered you were an Ice-Type some time ago, from what I understand.”

Regardless of how quickly they’d attempted to silence all Ice Mages from revealing their magic type, the Order had found itself in a great deal of trouble concealing *my* magic type, given my distinctive blue hair. I’d apparently been stalked, spied upon, and nearly attacked several times in the past few weeks, but the guards had prevented every such assault, as well as keeping themselves hidden from both me and my attacker.

This is insane! I had no idea all this was going on until the Director told me just now! I’m impressed with how discreet the Knights had been in protecting me, but at the same time I’m rather frustrated I wasn’t informed about what was going on. I’m not some damsel to be rescued every time I find myself in distress! I can hold my own in a fight, you know!

Now now, Nanalie, that’s not very grateful, is it? I sigh to myself. Hold on —“Ice Maiden.” If he knew that I was, ah, “a maiden,” and that I was a target, then by placing me under the Order’s protection, pretty much every other Knight must’ve found out that I’m... “a maiden”... Oh dear, let’s not think about that either.

“We’re really quite fortunate that the shapeshifter didn’t realize you had a security detail.”

There’d been two reasons for not letting me in on the plan, she tells me: one, if I had known, I might have unwittingly revealed to my stalker that there were Knights around, causing them to act more quickly and without indicating their plans to do so. Second had been the fact that the Knights wanted to discover who, exactly, it was that was trying to kidnap me. *Well, when it’s explained like that, I suppose it’s better I didn’t know.*

The spies Doran had sent into Orcinus went silent soon after crossing the borders. Cracking the powerful magic barriers protecting Orcinus from all sorts of outside forces had been considered, but plans to do so were abandoned due to the risk of demons attacking civilians. The only hand Doran had left to play was to trap or arrest my stalker before they could flee the Kingdom.

She tells me that the person who’d cast the Confusion Hex on me last night was a member of the Order. The Knight had apparently been afraid that if they didn’t render me unconscious, I might be hypnotized by the stalker.

I’d (clearly) not known what was going on, and still have no idea how I’d come into contact with my stalker last night, but because the Knights were able to catch the shapeshifter red-handed trying to get at me, one of the Knights was sent along with the shapeshifter to get inside the magical barrier protecting Orcinus. Having done so, the Knight was able to let in additional Knights through the barrier from the inside.

The forces of Sheera, Vestanu, and Doran had all gathered together and marched upon the palace of Orcinus, battling their way into the court of the Queen.

“Will Orcinus be alright after all that?”

“Hmmm, that’s a good question. I had the same thought myself. Unexpectedly, the Crown Prince does, however, seem to be a rather capable leader, so it’ll probably be just fine.”

The Queen had fought until her last breath—but the person who struck the final blow was her son the Crown Prince.

“What are they going to tell the families of the witches who were killed?”

“Well, that’s the saddest part of this story—they can’t be told the truth, ever.”

I feel as though...I’ve seen behind the curtain, glimpsed at truths not meant for me. Maybe I shouldn’t have heard any of what the Director just told me. Bit late to be regretting that now, however. But if not even the aristocracy of Doran will be told the truth, how can I be allowed to know? The Director tells me that the Knight Commander had asked *her* to be my personal guard while I was at work, so of course she’d known the whole story. *Goodness, the Director’s been going to all this trouble, for my sake? How can I ever—*

“I think it’s about time we give that back, don’t you think?”

“Give *what* back?” I ask, confused. The Director whispers some incantation under her breath, touches the necklace I’m wearing, and with a *snap* the silver clasp comes undone.

I look closely at the silver chain in my hands. *I tried so hard to get that off! How did she manage that?*

“You see, the Knight who cast that hex on you to put you to sleep—they imbued this necklace with half of their magical power. All so that you could be protected in case you were attacked over the course of the operation last night. They’re quite badly injured from what I hear, so it’d be best if this was returned to them as soon as possible, I think.”

“Are-Are they alright?! I-I had *no idea* any of that was even happening! I have to go right now—”

“There’s no point in you tagging along. The Knight’s already back on the Royal Isle, and the only thing that needs to be returned to them is this necklace.”

“But, Director Locktiss...”

Even if I hadn’t been wearing this necklace, my mysterious protector had apparently intended to put some sort of magical protection on me, but the necklace had caught their eye and so they’d decided to imbue the necklace with their own power. *I can’t believe a Knight would do something so reckless as giving away part of their magical ability...!* I clench my fists. I want to slap

myself for ever thinking that I should curse my protector with smelly feet for all of eternity.

The only one who stinks here is you, Nanalie. You deserve athlete's foot for the rest of your life.

"What sort of 'operation' did they do?"

"Well... I guess I can tell you that." The Director pauses, seeming a bit hesitant to continue her story. She turns to look back out the window.

"It was a sting operation, basically. One of the Knights took your place and acted as a decoy—as bait, really."

"'Took my place'?"

"Last night, you fainted...correct? After that, the Knight removed the dress you were wearing, shapeshifted into you, and put on the dress themself. They're skilled enough at shapeshifting that not even your stalker could tell the difference. The operation was a total success. Just as the Order had planned, your stalker kidnapped the decoy and fled the Kingdom, entering Orcinus."

If I hadn't gone to the palace last night, this plan wouldn't have worked at all. But since I did, it sounds like everything went off without a hitch. Except for the injury my mysterious Knight protector suffered. They must've gotten that while they were fighting inside the Orcinus court, weakened because they'd been protecting me with half of their power...or maybe the Orcinus Palace Guard had roughed them up while they'd still been in my shape. No matter when it had happened, it's still my fault it ever happened at all.

"He—Come on, Nanalie—"

"Please, take me with you when you return the necklace! If they're badly injured—if it doesn't look like they're going to make it—we have to go *right now!*"

I dash over next to the Director and grab her arm. *I won't let go! I absolutely will not let go, even if she kicks me! That poor Knight might be in terrible pain right now, and what if they die while we're talking here like this—!*

The Director sighs as she looks down at me as I remain clinging tightly to her

arm, and pats my head. “Hmmmm... Okay!”

“Director Locktiss?”

“Let’s go together. Grove told me not to bring you along, but promises are made to be broken, right? Especially any promises I make with *him*. After all, we can’t have you moping around distracted about some wounded Knight when you’re starting your new position tomorrow, can we?” She pauses for a moment, then continues, saying, much more quietly: “There are some promises that are better to break than keep, after all.”

I’ve no idea what she’s thinking when she says that, but with her consent, both of us head off together to the Royal Isle.

* * * *

We head to the Royal Isle on our familiars. I’d wanted to use that magic circle of teleportation to get there as fast as possible, but the Director dissuaded me from trying that by telling me that there was a risk that we’d be “ripped” if I made a mistake in the incantation, given my current upset state. *What a violent thing to visualize.*

One of the reasons the security had been so tough last night was simply that the Order was on guard against my stalker and other potential Orcinus agents. *That person from Orcinus must have been enormously powerful to cause trouble even for people like the Knight Commander and Rockmann.*

“Theodora... You brought her.”

“I’m sure you guessed I would anyway, right?”

The Knight Commander, astride his pegasus, is waiting for us at the landing site on the Royal Isle. The Director and I both get off our familiars. I shrink Lala down to fun-size and put her on my shoulder, greeting the Commander with a nod. *I must have caused him so much extra work recently.* He gets down off his mount as well, asks me if I’m all right, and thanks me for coming anyway.

I am, however, completely fine, and not injured in the slightest. *The only ones we need to be worried about are the Knights who went out into the field, right?* But I don’t say that, as it’s not my place to question the Knight Commander, and merely nod my head and tell him I am quite well, thank you. I also confess that I

had no idea what had been going on around me until the Director told me. “Silly me!” I say. “Thanks to your hard work, I’m quite fine.”

Who cares about me? I want to know what’s going on with the Knight who shapeshifted into me.

“Here’s the necklace,” Director Locktiss says, offering it to the Commander.

“Excellent. Follow me, you two.” The Knight Commander guides us into the Order’s barracks. He and the Director talk about a lot of things as we walk, but I remain silent all the while, thinking only of the severely wounded Knight. *As soon as I return their power with this necklace, I’ll thank them. I’ll even volunteer to be their servant for a whole month! I’m not used to people ordering me around all the time, but I think I could help them by cooking and cleaning for them, at least.*

The skies are full of Knights flying to and from the barracks on their pegasi. A few of them are wearing *green*, however, not the usual black uniform of Doran’s Order.

From the few words I hear some of the green-clad Knights say, it sounds like they’re from either Vestanu or Sheera. *They were a part of the operation last night, so I’m sure there’s still a lot left for them to take care of, reports to write, debriefs. Must be tough.*

I sure hope Nikeh didn’t get injured. If she is injured, she’ll probably be taken care of just fine by using healing magic, but that doesn’t mean she won’t feel any pain. Plus, there’s no guarantee that her injuries are the type magic can heal. All healing spells do is activate the body’s own abilities to heal itself to the greatest extent. That usually means that if they’re missing a leg or an arm, it’s a much different story—and much more difficult.

Something that the school nurse, a highly skilled healer herself, had told me once was that if you wanted to perform regeneration magic on someone missing a limb or worse, you really ought to ask someone who specializes in such spells to do it for you.

Regeneration magic is, of course, a type of spellwork I’d have loved to be able to cast myself, but I’d never quite gotten the hang of it to the point where I could heal myself as cleanly and perfectly as the school nurse could. I’d thought

that my main issue was my inability to concentrate on the issue at hand, so I'd broken my arm to practice healing it—or rather, I'd *attempted* to break it in the school courtyard, but the nurse caught me in the act and scolded me for days. *She was scarier than my mother herself at that moment.*

Director Locktiss waves to me. "Nanalie, come inside."

"Yes, ma'am."

Next to the barracks (which is really more of a gray fortress), I see a simple large canvas tent has been erected. The thin yellow cloth covering the entrance flutters in the wind. It's around dusk now, so it's getting rather dark, and there's light shining through the cloth of the tent. I hear a panicked voice as well: "Are they *still* not here?" "Hurry it up!" "The healing, it..."

"Commander, you took forever!"

"Just hold on now, I've brought it, so calm down."

"Hey, Nanalie! Glad to see you're alright!"

The instant I step inside the tent I hear Nikeh's voice, and a moment later she's hugging me. I hug her back, happy as can be. "I'm glad you're alright too!" I say—but then when I see what's beyond her, deeper inside the tent, I freeze.

"Is that...me?"

In the center of the tent, lying on a gurney, I see *myself* being healed using magic.

...Well, no, that's the Knight who shapeshifted into me. Next to her (the Knight's shapeshifted, so I don't actually know if it's a man or a woman, but I'm guessing it's a woman), Ms. Weldy is sobbing her eyes out and clasping her hands together in prayer.

I look more closely. My (the Knight's) left arm is missing from the elbow down. Her shoulder is covered in blood, and there's enough blood in her hair to make it look more purple than blue. It's so horrible, I can hardly stand to look at her.

None of the other Knights inside the tent seem to be injured quite as badly—well, they might be hurt, some seriously, but it's clear that this Knight, in my

shape, is in the *worst shape* of the entire lot.

“You!”

Ms. Weldy stands up when she realizes that I’ve entered the tent. She marches right up to my face, cheeks still wet and eyes leaking tears. *Is she going to yell at me that this is all my fault? She’d be entirely right to say so. If that Knight hadn’t taken my place in this whole operation, or given me half their magical ability, there’s no way they’d have been injured this badly.*

All Ms. Weldy does, however, is look at me closely, from head to toe. She says nothing, merely stares at me.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, unable to handle the pressure of her silence and her gaze. She hears me, I think, because the very next moment she looks me in the eyes and says:

“You seem fine... Good for you.” Without further ado, Ms. Weldy walks past me and out of the tent.

“...feeling weak. Without that power...can’t shift back into...real body.”

“Good work on the healing so far. But we shouldn’t be surprised it’s taking this long without half your power.”

I walk over to where the Commander and the injured Knight are speaking. I kneel down beside them. The Knight, who’d had her eyes closed, cracks them open, probably because of all the noise we’re making.

It’s extremely odd to see myself lying on the ground in such a state.

Her eyes blink rapidly as she notices me kneeling beside her, looking at the Knight Commander, then back at me. I’m taken over by some strange feeling when we make eye contact—I want to thank her, but her sapphire blue eyes look so surprised that I’m at a loss as to what to say to her.

“I told you...not to bring her here, didn’t I?”

That’s my voice, but it isn’t my own.

This Knight who’s taken my shape has also perfectly taken on my way of speaking.

“Alois, I used that incantation to get the necklace off of her and have brought it back here to you. How do we return your power?”

“It won’t come back right away. If you could just leave it resting on top of my chest...I’ll feel better soon enough.”

I’d been listening to the whole conversation—*but hold on, did I hear that correctly? I’m not hallucinating, am I? What did the Commander just call the Knight?*

I look down at “myself.”

“...Rockmann?”

* * * *

By the Goddess. By the Goddess above!

I have literally been rendered unable to think. I’m not the type to use the Goddess’s name in vain, but there are no other words for how I feel right now.

Great Goddess above, what in the world is going on here?!

“Alois...Rockmann?”

I’d completely thought that the Knight who’d shapeshifted into my form was a woman! Hadn’t the Director said something about “wearing a dress”? Of course I’d imagine it to be a woman! What kind of man wants to shapeshift into my body so he can go around wearing my dresses?! Of course, there’d always been a possibility that the Knight was a man, but I’d dismissed that without a second thought! Before entering this tent, I was worried it had been Nikeh, but since she hugged me right as I’d walked in, I knew immediately that it hadn’t been her.

“You told me not to say anything, and I made Theodora promise me she wouldn’t bring her along, but...”

So what, Commander?! Who cares about all that?! I should’ve been told! He should’ve told me himself, at least! The only thing I’m capable of doing in this situation is freezing up.

I’m told that Rockmann has been the one guarding me all this time, that Rockmann’s the one who suffered a severe injury for my sake, and that

Rockmann's the one who wore my dress. ALL of my questions, answered all at once, with the same answer: *this guy.*

He sees me opening and closing my mouth as I struggle for words, and his lips curl upwards a bit as if he's trying to smile. *Even that must be painful for him.* "You...you don't look so good," he says, letting out a weak laugh at his own bad joke. The one who's injured is unquestionably *Rockmann*, not me, but he's trying to act cool as he always does, even in a situation like this. *Wait—he shapeshifted into me, and changed into my dress...does that mean he saw me naked?! Actually, never mind. This isn't the time to think about that.*

Usually we'd start arguing at a time like this, but the only words that escape my lips are, "By the Goddess above, Rockmann, what have you..."

"Well...it looks like you...heard what happened, I guess."

Rockmann forces himself up a little to meet my gaze evenly, clearly trying to discern what's going on inside my head as I kneel here, silent. Underneath the bandages around his chest, I can tell that he's gotten out of the blue dress Maris made for me. The woman who's casting healing magic on him tells him to lie back down, but he just says he's fine as long as he's wearing the necklace and stays sitting up to look at me.

"Well, I must say...it would have been much nicer if we could've made *you* the bait." He laughs, shaking "his" bloodstained blue hair out of his face.

Why, of course Ms. Weldy was crying over him. I think she would have been crying over anyone who'd gotten themselves in a state like this. Still, there had been something rather *heartwrenching* in the way that she'd said "good for you" to me, despite the fact that she'd gone on and on to me back in the Soreiyu District about how head over heels she was for him.

"I, uh...could have been the bait, you know."

"Ha! As if we could let you, a commoner, be entrusted with such an important task... Hel?"

I know I couldn't have been the bait in their operation. The problem had been something for the Order and the royals to solve, and they couldn't have placed a simple commoner like me in danger for a foreign expedition like *that*. It would

have been insane even to have asked me to volunteer, I know that.

But still.

Sob. Sob.

“Hel?”

Still.

“I-I—I’m *not crying!!*”

I’m not crying because I’m sad.

“I’m just—so frustrated! It’s just—I never beat you, when we fought, so I guess I thought that, you know, even if you got into a really bad fight, you’d be okay—!”

I’d really thought that. I’d never even *seen* him injured until now, and he’d always seemed to easily bat me away whenever I’d attacked him. Of course it sounds a bit weird to say that I “did whatever I had wanted to him,” but I’d shown him no mercy in our little spats, and he’d shown me none either. *Since we’d cancel each other out whenever we fought with magic—him with Fire, me with Ice—we ended up arguing instead of actually dueling, of course, but we said some pretty awful stuff to each other, that’s for sure. We still say horrible things to each other, for that matter.*

“I never thought that you could be defeated, so to see you all beat up like this, lying on the floor, and knowing it’s *because of me*—it hurts more than if I was the one missing an arm—”

Or at least, that’s what I *would have said*, in my sad, painful state of mind, but I can’t say something ridiculous like that to Rockmann, who is both *physically* sad and in pain at the moment.

“Nanalie, calm down. You’re causing a *pestrokraive*.”

Nikeh pats my back. I realize that the whole inside of the tent is filled with cold mist and bits of furniture here and there are covered in ice. Even the ground beneath my knees has hardened, white veins of ice cracking out from where I kneel.

I find it even more frustrating that my first-ever *pestrokraive* was caused by

stressing over *this guy*. *I don't like this crybaby version of myself. I don't like her at all.*

“Sorry, for, crying—”

I feel as though I've seen someone else crying over an injured person like this, much as I am doing now.

It had been that time my mother had, unusually for her, dressed up all fancy, and dressed me up as well, and taken me to the best theater in town, right under the Royal Isle, to see a play. The play had been a romance (which had failed to hold my interest, so I'd fallen asleep halfway through), and a woman had run over to a man fallen on the ground, bawling her eyes out, then kissed him, and, miraculously enough, saved him by doing so, happily ever after. The End. The kind of simple story appropriate for children.

Not in one hundred—no, not in one thousand years would I ever kiss this guy, and I am absolutely not crying because I'm sad! Furthermore, why the hell am I remembering something like that at a time like this?

“Hey, you...”

Rockmann seems to have regained some of his power. His hair color is changing from my blue to his blond. My blue eyes, turning red. My thin shoulders, growing thick with smooth, slender muscles. My small breasts, losing their softness to take on that special tautness of a man's chest.

His left arm completely returns as well, and within moments every one of his injuries are gone, along with all the blood that had been on his body. He's completely healed.

Can every Knight do that kind of healing magic? Or is this just Rockmann's own power that's doing this? No matter which it was, it's clear that the power inside my necklace is now his again.

“Yayyyyy! Captain!”

Ms. Weldy, who happened at that very moment to step back inside the tent, sees him returned to normal, lifts her arms in the air, and hops over to see him. In her hurry she knocks me over, but I'm not mad. *At least she seems happy.*

“I’m heading out on a long expedition to the Land of the Sea now. I’m tracking that demon you saw back at the palace.”

“Hold on, you can’t tell me something like that, can you? I’m ‘just a commoner,’ after all.”

“I’ll be going with two Knights from my unit and the Knights from Vestanu.”

“Hey, are you listening to anything I’m saying?”

Rockmann’s changed into an outfit a little different from his black Knight’s uniform. Seeing that I still looked to be on the verge of tears, the Commander told the two of us to stay inside the tent for awhile, alone, and here we were, acting like mature adults for once (for the most part).

The small magical ball of fire lighting up the tent drifts around from corner to corner.

Rockmann sighs. “What am I going to do? I’m so sad that I can’t tell Sally, Maris, Taleena, Dmitri, Nala, Bajistra, Hannis, and Shilly goodbye. Can someone like you possibly understand what I’m feeling right now?”

“As if I’d want to know what it feels like to be some lousy womanizer,” I spit back at him, rolling my eyes.

Why am I still here?

Just moments ago I’d tried to (very briefly) thank him for what he’d done and leave the room as quickly as possible. After having cried right in front of him, I feel uncomfortable, to say the least. *I’d very much like to not be in the same room as him right now, thank you very much.*

Ms. Weldy—who’d draped herself all over Rockmann for a good long minute, will, it seems, be going with him on this expedition. She’s gone back to the barracks to prepare for their journey. “I guess I can give you some time alone with the Captain,” she’d said, very reluctantly. “I’m feeling *very* generous right now,” she added before leaving. I wouldn’t have minded her staying, but if she was really “feeling very generous” about telling me to stay with him, I felt like I didn’t have any choice in the matter.

Once I'd resolved to be the servant for whoever had turned out to be my body double, I really had no choice but to offer that to Rockmann, despite my reluctance. He barely looked at me as he refused my offer: "I don't need a crybaby servant, but thanks." While I'd very much felt like slapping him when he called me a crybaby, I was unable to deny the truth of his claim, and he *was* the person I owed my life to. *He doesn't deserve to be slapped—at the moment, that is.*

I've realized something else in the course of all this: this guy, "Alois Rockmann," seems to actually be one of the good guys, unexpectedly enough. *Not only "good," but "really good," for that matter. Not like I'm going to admit I think that to his face, however.* I look away from him.

"Oh, sorry," he says, apparently thinking he's hurt my feelings. "Calling you a crybaby was a bit rude, huh?"

"This has nothing to do with you calling me a crybaby!"

I take that back. This guy's totally awful. Dammit, why'd I let myself cry in front of him?

Rockmann is full of energy, acting as though he *hadn't* just been missing half of his arm. *Am I losing some sort of competition here? Despite being injured that badly, here he is now, ready to head out on another adventure outside the Kingdom. Just how much drive, energy, and motivation does this guy have, anyway?*

The Land of the Sea is on the other side of the ocean. Between the ocean and Doran lie five Kingdoms, though, so it's practically on the other side of the world. The Land of the Sea actually lies at the *bottom* of the sea, and it's the home of mermaids and other unusual magical creatures. The Kingdoms surrounding the ocean send a lot of travelers down there, from what I hear, but for those of us in Doran, it's so far away that I know of practically no one who's ever been there. My friend, Kara Yakkurin, had always told me she dreamed of going there one day. *Now that she's an archaeologist, I wonder if she's made it there?*

"Alright you two, why don't we settle down by giving each other a nice little good-luck charm?"

The Director, who'd been standing near the entrance talking with Nikeh, heard us snapping at each other and came over to calm us down. In her hands I see two small, green boxes. She gives one to me and the other to Rockmann.

Good-luck charms?

"Inside these boxes are your futures. I'm going to give one box to each of you. Be careful, because if you open the lid, you'll never meet each other again. If you keep them closed, you're definitely going to meet again—or so they say. What do you think?"

The Director looks back and forth between me and Rockmann, seeming very pleased with herself.

This seems like the type of thing Zozo would like. As a follower of Lady Merakisso, she'd—well actually, she ignored her fortune the other day, but I still think she'd like this type of thing. I wonder if she developed her taste for fortune-telling and the like from hanging around the Director too much...?

There are no decorations on the small box she's handed to me, but I notice that on the lid is a small inscription, written in red: *"Turn me forward, turn me backward, this marble's going nowhere."*

I honestly have no idea what that means. I may be a good student and a quick study, but I was never good with riddles.

"Huh, so that's how it works."

And as if to counter my very thoughts:

"I checked inside and it was empty," Rockmann says to me. *He opened the freaking box the second she handed it to him!* "Look," he says, flashing the empty inside of the box. It is, indeed, empty.

This bastard... He's not got an ounce of chivalry in him. Maybe I should grab some of that nice golden hair of his and give it a good yank.

I don't particularly care about him being chivalrous towards *me*, of course, but the Director had given us these as a present and told us not to open them. *Only someone totally heartless would do something like that. He's basically saying he never wants to meet me again, isn't he? I think it's even more*

offensive that he didn't just tell it to me straight.

His red eyes are practically shining with mirth as he watches me get irritated. I look down at my own little box.

"Oh, is that so," I say. "Well if you've opened yours already, I'll open mine once I get back to my dorm."

I *could* just open it right here, but there's a time and place for everything, after all. *Why'd he have to do it first?!*

"H-Hey..." The Director's gritting her teeth a bit as she looks at Rockmann, then lets out a sort of pained laugh. She'd given us these boxes as a "nice little good-luck charm," but he went ahead and opened his right in front of her, while I am already declaring I shall do the same. *Of course she'd be annoyed. Sorry, Director.*

"Oh, that's right—I wanted to give this to you."

"What is it?"

Rockmann makes a show of pulling something out of a pocket inside his brown robe.

"When I cast that spell on your necklace, the flower inside withered from the heat, so..." He passes me a flower crown made of couplet flowers. "You wanted to give that to someone, didn't you?"

"But I can't—"

"This is merely a token of His Highness's grace. He gives all the Knights one flower crown every year, you know. This is the one I had pinned on my chest. I guess it's his way of thanking us for doing our jobs during the Festival of the Flower Goddess, when we can't exactly enjoy the day how we might like to."

Okay, now I get it—that's why he'd spoken that way when I saw him in town the other day.

I'd wondered what he'd meant by "the grace of His Highness," but it made sense for the busy Knights to be given couplet flowers so that when they met their special person while out on patrol, they'd still be able to give them some flowers.

“It seems a bit of a shame to give something so lovely like this to me,” I say, rather sharply.

“Well,” he says, sighing and gesturing in my general direction, “consider it my way of apologizing for having seen your...*flat* figure.”

“Hmph!” I yank the flower crown away from him.

What a lout! Here I was, trying very hard not to think about what he’d seen, and he brought it right up!

I’d wanted to give Maris the flower I’d picked out for her myself. *I wonder if she’ll be happy if I re-gift her these couplets from Rockmann?*

“Hmph! Thank you *very much* for your kindness,” I say.

“I sure do hope that charm works,” he says, winking at me.



I grip the couplet flowers tightly and glare at Rockmann. He laughs at me as he holds up that empty box of his.

That night, a group led by Rockmann, made up of Knights from both Vestanu and Doran, depart the Kingdom as they set out on their journey.

Prince Zenon is made the temporary Captain of the First Platoon, and Nikeh is also transferred into his unit to make up for the missing Knights. The absence of the Knights from the First Platoon is explained to the public as a “study abroad” opportunity for Rockmann and his subordinates to learn how other Kingdoms use their Knights. Maris sends me as many as *three* letters in one day describing how upset the members of Doran’s high society are to find the Duke’s gallant son missing from their world. *Well, ain’t that just too bad for y’all, huh?*

And so another year goes by in which I haven’t beaten Rockmann at anything. *Doesn’t look like I’ll be one-upping him anytime soon, that’s for sure.*

But I will beat him at something, one day. I’m going to work hard on my magic, hard at my job, and just keep getting better.

And so it was that in the third month of the Season of Flowers, I finally sat down at that reception desk that I’d dreamed of for so long. In the corner of my room, next to the window, that small little box remains, firmly closed.

Bonus Short Story

The Secret

“Mom, what do you like about Dad?”

One day, while I was sitting in my school dorm room, listening to Maris and the others chatter on about their love lives, I recalled a question I’d asked my mother as a young child.

All of us in the room had gotten to be good friends by this point in our fifth year, and so Benjamine had said, “Let’s all have a chat before going on vacation,” which had led to seven other girls and I sitting around talking about *exactly* what you’d imagine girls of our age to be talking about.

“He’s just, like, so handsome I can’t help but literally *adore* him for it,” one of the girls says to me, as I play the role of listening to all of my friends’ worries and concerns about their “love lives.”

Her words echo the answer my mom had given to that question I’d asked her.

“I like how handsome he is, I suppose.”

“How is he handsome?”

“I don’t know, he just is?”

“Mom, that doesn’t tell me anything!”

My mother had replied without the slightest pause for thought, so I remembered being quite suspicious of her answers.

“Your father, when I met him, really annoyed me for how mean and nosy he was, you know. But he took me out of a tiny little box, with nothing in it at all, and showed me so many new things. He showed me a whole new world.”

My mean dad had taken my mother out of a box and showed her something nice. That’s how I’d understood her words at the time.

“Your grandmother and your grandfather were against us getting together, so in the end we eloped. I was glad we did, and I still am.”

“Even though he has a big belly now?”

The only thing I’d known about my grandparents on my mother’s side was that my mother had cut all ties with them upon leaving home, and every time I asked her for more details she got this very sad look on her face, so I hadn’t pushed her for an answer. All I knew was that they weren’t from this country. I was curious to find out more, and did want to know where she came from, but I’d refrained from asking more questions—until that day.

“Mom, where did you come from?” It’d been quite difficult for me to ask that question to her, knowing she might get sad again.

My mother, who was washing the dishes, stopped what she was doing and turned to look down at me.

“I came from a land far, far away: the Land of the Sea.”

She’d said this with a cheerful, sing-song voice while looking out the kitchen windows, up at the bright blue sky.

“Whaaaat? No way, you’re lying.”

“Goodness, was it that easy to tell?”

“...—nalie, Nanalie? Hey, are you listening to me?”

Shoot, I was completely lost in my memories. I don’t think I’ve heard a single word of what she’s just said.

Just as Benjamine and Maris began chiding me for my lack of attention, one of the noble girls called out from her spot by the window. “Look! It’s Sir Alois!” She went on to tell us, *most* excitedly, that he was *strolling in the courtyard*, and so the rest of us simply *must* come to watch him. Every other girl except me dashed over to the window. Even Nikeh and Benjamine, who normally showed no interest in Rockmann, ran over there. Maris, noticing that I had stayed put and was merely rolling my eyes at the rest of them, came to yank me over to the window to join the rest.

“Nanalie darling, be a lady and stop insulting Sir Alois all the time! It wouldn’t

hurt if you tried liking him even, hm?”

Frowning at this unwanted lecture from Maris, I looked out the window and saw that Rockmann was indeed in the courtyard. *Today's a day off, so he must be just walking around by himself, to relax or something.*

“I’m not about to fall in *loooooove* with someone I *haaaaaaate*,” I say. “Never ever—oh!”

Our eyes met.

“Did Sir Alois look at us just now? WHAAA! He noticed us, even though we’re so high up...! It must be fate!”

Dear Mom,

What, exactly, do you like about Dad?



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The Sorcerer's Receptionist: Volume 2

by Mako

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